



Beauty of the Beast #3 Rise Of The Serviatrixes: Part A Bitter Reunions

## Chapter One

### **A Storm Of Serviatrixes Revisited**

She had been consigned to be the False One. It actually made everything simpler. Pluck didn't have to worry about saving all of Wellspring. She only had to save the ones she cared about. Pluck took the Servir Oath and declared herself the False One so that Tabitha would tell everyone within the Valley of Blood to evacuate. She had handed her life over to the Shadow to save her friends, Fairah, and Votar, and she did save them. Pluck should have died by the hands of the Shadow, but they wanted her life so that she may continue to live it as the False One. Even then... all Pluck had to worry about was keeping GuideMa alive and herself from helping the Shadow but now... Pluck had learned she had a father and that she was a Daughter of a King. The knowledge gave her hope that she still had the destiny she left Edward and everyone she knew to stay on Wellspring but deep down, she still doubted. Everything had changed again when she discovered there was a third one claiming to be the Serviatrix. Pluck listened as she and two others stood within the TowerRoth Citadel's throne room. GuideMa was telling her something and this new knowledge would send her down a different path. "I long ago had learned of one of the Serviatrix's Prophecies," GuideMa explained as she had difficulty telling the Woman the real reason for their conversation. "I had been so moved by it that I found that I wanted to know more about the Serviatrix." "Tell me of this prophecy you speak of," Pluck said as a stirring within her soul prepared her to accept the role that had been thrust upon her. GuideMa began, "One comes by sea, the other from a rival kingdom, and the third from among outcast. The Serviatrix shall appear and the claim of false Serviatrixes shall multiply. The face of the Serviatrix shall take her spot immediately. The arm of the Serviatrix shall grasp for gold." GuideMa paused as if inferring the next part was about her before she spoke, "The heart of the Serviatrix shall act first." The Femor paused again, and then she said, "The three shall finally meet but not all at once. As cords of a rope, the Serviatrix is strong. Bind their hands, and the true Serviatrix's strength shall increase." Pluck turned from her and Nirva, who was also in the throne room. Votar's advisor also had a purpose for being there. Pluck took a few steps away from them as she absorbed all she had heard so far. She turned to them, and then the Femor continued. "The one who is atop of the Throne of Kroth when the dancing lights of green and blue begin and become as Man's blood... this one shall lead them. Look for the sign when Auror the Greater and Array the Lesser are furthest apart." GuideMa paused, and then she declared as she had finally come to the conclusion herself, "You were atop of the throne at that time." She still had much to tell the Woman, but GuideMa needed to be patient and take one step at a time. She also needed to let the Woman absorb this new revelation. "I wasn't," Pluck insisted as the weight of the Serviatrix once again bear down on her shoulders. "I couldn't have been," she added as she went and sat on the only chair in the room. "But that would mean..." A terror struck her whole body as the realization of her role in the future sunk into her heart and mind, and Pluck said, "But that would mean that I'm... that I could possibly be..." The terror she felt was replaced with a horror-filled terror as she spoke, "But I gave my life to the Shadow." Pluck thought she heard the Dragon Tree laughing as she stated, "The Shadow own me... The Shadow will be coming for me... Malus will—" "Are you sitting on my throne?" a voice that wasn't any of the other two interrupted her

thoughts. Pluck turned as Sabrina and her four companions entered the throne room. She immediately noticed her tattoo of a purple rose with five claw marks through it next to her collarbone. The mark was not natural but artwork imprinted on the skin. Tabitha's Scarred Rose was a birthmark, and her own Scarred Rose was... well... Sabrina's fiery long hair was still pulled back in a braid that loosely wrapped around her neck three times. The braid looked smooth and freshly woven unlike the frayed looked the hair had when they first met. Her companions consisted of a Dreadgon, Femor, and two races Pluck had never seen before. Pluck had been contemplating all that had transpired for the last few sun's cycles, and it took her a while to realize some people had intruded on their conversation. She questioned, "Your throne?" "Yes, my throne," Sabrina repeated as she walked around the room as if she owned it. "I claimed it last night and the right to be the Serviatrix." Her four companions spread out as if to encircle them as prey. Sabrina said, "You must be Pluck. The other would-be who foolishly gave up her freedom and became a servitor to the other would-be." Pluck was so far into her thoughts, she hadn't pulled from them yet so her mind was still a little muddled. GuideMa didn't like how the five newcomers were acting so she moved closer to the Woman. Nirva did the same thing. Pluck slowly pulled from her thoughts as she sensed a little hostility in the air. Sabrina walked right up to Pluck and demanded, "Remove yourself from my seat." Pluck glanced at her companions who seemed to be ready for a fight. She turned her attention to GuideMa, who looked equally as concerned as she felt, so Pluck stood and stepped to the side. Sabrina plopped herself down on the throne as if she was Queen of all Wellspring. Pluck still wasn't sure if her companions would attack them or not, but they did seem to lessen their aggressive stances. Sabrina spoke as she picked dirt out of her claws, "Tad says I'm top now so you have to listen to what I say." Pluck looked at GuideMa, who was now standing right beside her, then to Nirva, and turned her attention back to Sabrina and asked, "And what do you say?" "I don't know," Sabrina admitted, and then she wiggled the toes of her bare feet as she commanded, "Rub my feet or something." Pluck realized Sabrina seemed to be testing her. First was the seat of the throne and now... "Alba will be doing no such thing!" Tabitha snapped as she and her Roth bodyguard entered. Sabrina's companions once again took up their aggressive stances. Pluck was ready to leave and let Sabrina have the whole throne room, so she moved closer to GuideMa and whispered, "I thought you said no one would probably be here." GuideMa questioned her, "Why would anyone want to come here?" "Good, all the would-bes are here?" Sabrina said. "What should I have the two of you do for me?" Tabitha yelled at her, "I'll be doing nothing for you except for toppling you off of your high and mighty seat." The three Serviatrixes were together once again, and all Sabrina seemed to want to do was antagonize the other two into a confrontation. "Who?" Sabrina laughed out. "You and that Roth with you? I don't think so," Sabrina told her. "Anyway, I sat on the throne during the occurrence, and so I claim the right to be in charge." Gamemnon and then Tad entered. Pluck glanced at them and so did GuideMa. It was getting crowded in the throne room. Gamemnon inquired, "Are you challenging Tabitha to a duel?" Sabrina stood as the four with her gathered around her, and then Sabrina questioned, "And what if the answer is yes?" "You have a right to challenge her," Gamemnon told her. "But know that the challenge is to the death." Sabrina rose from the throne and walked down the few steps that led to the seat and stated, "Fine by me. I only need to know if mercy is allowed if this would-be should surrender to me." "No, it is to the death," Gamemnon replied. "Tabitha, where is your sword? I see that you don't have it with you." "Don't let him do this," Pluck told GuideMa.



"Someone will get hurt." "What power do you believe I have over the duke?" GuideMa questioned her. "More than a vile Woman and servir would have," Pluck replied. "Tell him Tabitha should have more time learning her sword before she engages in any battle. Tell him Sabrina might look rough but I do believe she has fighting skills. I'm not sure Tabitha can boast the same." GuideMa started for the Duke of Torlawn. "Sword? What sword?" Sabrina inquired as she noticed the Immortal Toadian supporting her had come in with the duke. "Are you already trying to delay the duel?" "The Serviatrix's sword," Gamemnon declared. "Another sign of the true Serviatrix. Do you possess such a sword?" Sabrina glanced at Tad, and Tad stated, "Show them ye's weapons." She removed two short swords that had been sheathed to her back, and then Sabrina went after the unarmed Tabitha with them. Pluck rushed forward to get in between the two as Sabrina brought the two short swords down for a double attack. Pluck managed to raise the Lux, who was on her left forearm as a black leather gauntlet, and he formed a large shield for her without Pluck having to ask the Lightning Sword. The blue-steel shield was only half its size about five hands end to end. Both of Sabrina's swords struck the shield, and she retreated, seeing the False One also had some sort of magical item. "Will the contest be two against one?" Sabrina questioned. "I can take both of you." "We need to stop," Pluck said. "The Shadow—" "I care not to hear a reason for your cowardice," Sabrina stated. "Fight me or proclaim me the one and only Serviatrix." Tabitha rushed around Pluck and stood a few paces in front of her and very close to Sabrina as if to protect her servir, and then Tabitha said, "You are no Serviatrix. You are only some ruffian." "I have been called worse," Sabrina told her. "So what will it be? One on one? Two on one?" "We should not fight," Pluck insisted as she moved so she could stop the two if they should decide to duel. "I would like to see one of the prophecies come true at this very moment," Gamemnon spoke as he glanced at GuideMa who had arrived at his side, and then he continued, "I have been told of a Serviatrix Prophecy that states, 'Heed this warning and this promise. Man shall be the Twilight that breaks before the return of those cursed. Those who are proclaimed to be the Serviatrix shall spring up threefold, but only one shall claim to be false.' " He turned his attention to Pluck as he continued, " 'Beware and take care of this False One. She shall bring with her a potential for despair...' " Gamemnon skipped much of the prophecy and ended with, " 'For one Serviatrix to rise, two must fall and with the fall comes victory.' " Pluck turned to GuideMa, feeling a little betrayed for some reason, and she questioned the Femor, "You told him of the prophecy?" "I hold nothing from my duke," GuideMa replied as she, for the first time, saw the Woman hurt by her actions, not that Pluck had never been hurt by her before. It just seemed that the Woman never expected it from her at this time for some reason. It pained GuideMa to see this expression, and she never wanted to see it again, but she knew she would. GuideMa would continue to betray the Woman for as long as she served her duke, and she would serve the duke until she died. "There are so many prophecies," Sabrina spoke up. "How do any of you keep up with them? My Immortal suggested that I memorize them. I told him he could just shove all the prophecies up his—" "What is more important..." Tad interrupted her, "...is what the prophecy said. Two must fall for one to rise. It is clear that ye are to eliminate these other two so that ye may rise and save Wellspring." Earlier, Gamemnon had turned to one of his guards, who had entered with him, and gave the Necrom some instructions. The guard had rushed out some time back and returned, carrying a weapon. Gamemnon took the weapon from him and went up to Tabitha and gave her the sword. Tabitha took the sword from him and unsheathed it with this look of fear on her face. The sword glowed like a blue diamond. "This is

IceDiamond," Tabitha declared. "And this sword proves I am..." She glanced at Pluck and finished not as confident, "...the true Serviatrix." Sabrina spoke up as if excited, "Her weapon also glows like a blue diamond." She peered at her two short swords and said, "The two of us are alike in many ways but as that fine looking male Necroms spoke, 'Two must fall for the other to rise.' " Sabrina charged once again and this time, Tabitha pushed Pluck out of the way and engaged the third Serviatrix. Pluck feared for Tabitha, but she was not as uncultured in the ways of the sword as she thought. Roth instructors had taught Tabitha to fight in their way of swordplay, and she seemed to equal Sabrina with the blade as they danced about the room. Pluck turned to Gamemnon and told him, "Stop them. Someone will get hurt or worse... Someone will die." "Is that not the point?" he questioned her. Pluck turned to GuideMa once again and started to ask her to help her stop the fight, but then Pluck considered the Femor would only do as the duke wished. Pluck rushed over to the Toadian and as she did, the four companions, who had come with Sabrina, moved and blocked her way. "Stop this fight," she pleaded with the Toadian. "You are an Immortal. You are supposed to guide the Serviatrix." "It would seem Fairah has taught ye well," Tad spoke as he mostly ignored her and watched the fight. "My mother has," Pluck replied. "Stop this fight. We should not be fighting each other." "Why not?" Tad questioned. "It is part of the prophecy." "It is a Shadow Prophecy!" she yelled at him. "Do we really want to fulfill one of their prophecies?" "A Shadow Prophecy?" Tad repeated as Sabrina and Tabitha continued their duel. "I did not know they have such things when it concerns the Serviatrix." "They do and the partial one Gamemnon quoted is one of theirs," Pluck continued to yell. "Now stop the fight." The Toadian looked at Sabrina's four companions, and then he said, "Even if I wanted to, I could not stop Sabrina. She has a mind and will of her own." Pluck turned her full attention to the two dueling, and they appeared to be on equal ground as they continued to fight. They would start to tire as the duel continued and one of them would try to kill the other when an opening presented itself. Pluck looked down at the Lux as he rested on her left arm still as a shield, and she whispered to him, "If I draw you and enter, I still fear that one of us will end up hurt or worse. I need the Great Creator's wisdom." "He has heard your prayer," the Lux spoke to her so that no one else could hear. "Draw me and let your heart do the fighting." She placed her hand on the inside of her forearm and right on the gauntlet, and the Lux's hilt appeared in her hand. Pluck grabbed hold of the hand-and-a-half sword and drew the sword so that the gauntlet was no more. She raised the crackling sword high above her head, and then she commanded him, "Fill heated-hearts with fear and scatter them apart." The Lux sent out bolts of lightning toward the other two Serviatrixes, and the fierceness of the sword's might caused Sabrina and Tabitha to move apart and stop fighting. They both turned to her, and Sabrina looked like she wanted to kill her. Pluck kept the sword raised high, and the Lux crackled with his might and engulfed the one he protected with his power. Pluck declared for all to hear, "This is what the Shadow want. They want us to fight each other. They want us to turn on one another. I won't allow us to do as the Shadow wants." "You won't allow," Sabrina repeated. "How are you going to stop me? You are the False One. You already said so yourself. Why should I listen to anything you say?" "Do not listen to me," Pluck spoke and then motioned to her four companions and the Toadian, "Listen to the ones you trust. Listen to them but first, all of you should hear the whole prophecy from the Cave of Warning." Pluck paused, and then she quoted, "Heed this warning and this promise. Man shall be the Twilight that breaks before the return of those cursed. Those who are proclaimed to be the Serviatrix shall spring up threefold, but only one shall claim to be

false." "You claim to be the False One," Sabrina said. "Do you claim to be so because of this prophecy?" "I claimed to be so before I heard of this prophecy," Pluck replied. She lowered her sword to her side as she saw that Tabitha and Sabrina had calmed down. The Lux withdrew its might and was calm as steel once more. Pluck said, "Listen to the words of the Shadow Prophecy. 'Beware and take care of this False One. She shall bring with her a potential for despair and a capacity for hope. A mark shall brand her, a mark of two kingdoms that must never unite. Bring the False One to the side of despair and Wellspring shall be yours but if the False One clings to hope, the Serviatrix shall not be stopped.'" Pluck forced herself not to look at GuideMa, not wanting the others to know of her role as she said, "You shall know this False One by the one who comes to witness her end. This Witness shall see all things pertaining to the Serviatrix and shall be protected by the False One. Cling to despair and you shall be victorious. For one Serviatrix to rise, two must fall and with the fall comes victory. Heed this warning and this promise." She paused, and then Pluck said, "Don't you see? We should not fight amongst ourselves. We must come together or alone we will fall." "I think it is you who does not understand," Sabrina spoke up. "There can be only one Serviatrix. You claim to be the False One so you already have your role." She motioned to Tabitha and declared, "We still must determine who among the two of us is the Serviatrix." Sabrina separated herself from Tabitha as she said, "And we will determine it now." "What is going on here?" Fairah questioned as she and SoarOn entered the throne room. Sabrina and Tabitha started fighting again. Pluck spoke first, "We need to stop them. Sabrina means to kill Tabitha." Fairah turned to Tad and said, "Ye should stop ye's Serviatrix. Now is not a time to fight." "As I told the one ye back, Sabrina has a mind and will of her—" Fairah turned, lifted her hand, spoke a few words, and caused a small twister to appear in the throne room. The twister grabbed ahold of Sabrina and lifted her screaming in anger and rage. Fairah told the Toadian, "Ye should restrain ye's children even when they do not want to obey." She turned to Sabrina, who was still screaming, and Fairah questioned her, "Child, if ye want to be released ye must behave while we are within the citadel." "Slay the Immortal," Sabrina commanded her companions. They moved to do so. Fairah lifted her hand and threatened, "Do ye want to join the one ye follow?" They all paused and looked at Sabrina. She thought about it, and then Sabrina ordered, "I will cause no more trouble while we are within the citadel." Fairah had the twister gently land Sabrina to the floor. Sabrina glared at the female Immortal, and then she and those with her left. Tabitha rushed over to Pluck and said, "Why did you stop us? I could have taken her." "Have you ever killed before?" Pluck questioned her. "I have not but I am prepared—" "It is a very horrible thing to take the life of someone," Pluck told her. "If at all possible, you should not kill." Tabitha thought on her words as Gamemnon approached them and asked, "Is the servir telling her mistress what to do?" "I was protecting Tabitha," Pluck replied. "What were you doing? What if Tabitha had been hurt or even killed?" He came back by asking, "What if she had killed Sabrina? Tabitha would be the true Serviatrix." Pluck was appalled by what the duke said and wanted to take her sword and... She let go of her anger. It would do her no good in this situation. She turned and walked over to her mother. "Thank you," she told Fairah. "I didn't know what to do to stop them or even make them listen to me." "It is hard to make another do anything that is ye's own will," Fairah spoke. "Sometimes force is needed." Pluck laughed and then said, "I guess you are right. I just didn't think I should be the one to force the point." She looked at the Egle beside her mother, who had grand feathers of silver and white, and asked as she motioned to him, "Who is this?" "This is SoarOn. He is an old

friend of mine.” “An old friend...” Pluck repeated and noticed a difference in her mother’s voice when she spoke of this Egle. She had never heard Fairah speak with such... such... Pluck wasn’t sure what was behind her mother’s words but it was some sort of strong emotion. Pluck considered again the words ‘old friend’ and realized what they might mean, and she started to ask, “Do you mean—” “Yes, he is an Immortal like myself,” Fairah replied. “Why are ye in the throne room? I heard that ye were going to see Votar.” “Votar...” Pluck uttered. “I completely forgot. If you both will excuse me, I do need to hurry off.” She was tired, but Pluck found that her legs were much lighter as she ran in the direction that would take her to Votar. She rushed out and found Kabal standing outside the throne room along with Quip and Staunch. “GuideMa was completely wrong,” Pluck spoke to herself as she paused before them. “Everyone seems to want to go to the throne room.” She asked with a louder voice, “When did you arrive?” “Some time ago,” Kabal replied. Pluck questioned, “Why didn’t you come in?” “Why would I want to go someplace where there is fighting?” Kabal answered. “It was safe out here.” “What about you two?” Pluck questioned the Trife and Dreadgon. “Me and Staunch listened,” Quip replied. “We come if needed. Did not come in so we not needed.” Pluck thought about it and laughed as she said, “So you did not come in so that you wouldn’t cause any more friction that was already in the room?” Staunch and Quip nodded. “You should go and eat some breakfast if you already have not done so,” Pluck told her two friends. They headed off, and Pluck once again started for Votar’s room but then thought of something she should tell her mother before that and headed back into the throne room. Kabal observed her and wondered what the Woman was doing.

Earlier within the throne room...

Fairah started to go after her daughter to escort her as far as the Duke of Shangra’s room so that they could talk. She still needed to teach Pluck how to use the power of the Mystic Rose and wanted to set some time aside after Pluck finished visiting with Votar. It was more important than ever that Pluck was taught since Malus would be taking Pluck back to the Shadow at any time. Fairah took a few steps after her, but then SoarOn gently grabbed her wrist. “May I have a moment of ye’s time?” SoarOn questioned the White Lady. She glanced down at her wrist and his claw, smiled, and nodded, and then they moved to a more secluded section of the throne room. “What did ye want to speak to me about?” Fairah questioned. “Is it about my daughter or one of the other ones who claim to be the Serviatrix? Or have ye found something new about the missing Immortals?” “No, I actually just wanted to request that ye spend some time with me.” “Time..?” she repeated as if the concept of spending some of it with him was a foreign notion. “Yes,” SoarOn replied. “For we who have endless time, there seems to still be not enough of it. Shall ye spend some time with me before I continue on my quest?” Fairah glanced in the direction of Pluck, who had just re-entered and was looking at her as she contemplated if she should interrupt her conversation with the Immortal Egle. Pluck decided to wait. Fairah continued to look at Pluck and her daughter smiled at her, and Fairah smiled back. Fairah turned her attention back to the Immortal Egle and answered, not knowing her daughter actually wanted to talk to her, “The danger is gone for now. We could go for another walk.” “I would like that,” he said. Pluck decided that maybe she should interrupt so that she can continue on her way and started to walk over to them when the Duchess approached her. “Where is my brother?” Kabal asked the Woman as she glanced around looking for him. “I thought he would never have left your side once you were in his vision again, but I see that he is not in the throne room.” “He

should be in his room waiting on my return, and I have been gone longer than I should,” Pluck replied. She looked at her mother once more and decided they would have to speak at another time. She told the Duchess, “I should quickly return to him.” Pluck rushed off, and Kabal followed.

## **Chapter Two**

### **One Heart... Two Males...**

Elsewhere...

Sometime earlier...

Votar’s room...

Pluck and Votar had just started talking about their engagement when GuideMa had come and whisked Pluck away from Votar. He started brooding the moment she left him... again. His room had been so bright when he woke to find Pluck sitting across from him but with her absence, the room was growing ever dark. He went over to a washbasin, splashed water on his face, and stared at his reflection in the water. Votar thought about everything he and Pluck had said and dreaded that there would be no place for the two of them. He heard sounds coming from the other room, so he grabbed a towel and dried his face as he rushed into the room. “Pluck?” he called out. She wasn’t there, but Votar noticed that something was standing on the balcony and whatever the large creature was, it had two sets of wings. He walked closer to the balcony and realized the large creature had a saddle on it and was amount of some sort. Its dark feathers were all unkempt as if it never preened itself. He also noticed that the longer he stared at the feathered-creature the less he saw of it as if his eyes could never truly see what it looked like. Votar started to walk out to it but something made him pause. The darkness, he had felt overshadow his heart, was still there but there was new darkness and this darkness frightened him. Votar felt a presence behind him and quickly turned to see a male Necrom with black hair and gold fur. “You can’t be he,” Malus spoke. “You can’t be he who she gave her heart to.” “She..?” Votar repeated. “Do you speak of Pluck? Are you one of the Shadow who captured her?” “I am one of the Shadow but more importantly...” Malus replied, and then he professed, “I am the one who she offered her life to. I am the one who owns her life, and I’m here to claim what is mine.” “Who are you?” Votar demanded. “She has not told you?” Malus questioned. “You still haven’t told me if she is Pluck,” Votar yelled at him as he considered calling his guards in, and then he inquired, “Do you mean Pluck?” “Yes, I mean her,” Malus replied and then consider his importance to her. It was as if Pluck had not used his name since she left him. Malus questioned, “Has she not told you?” Votar again thought about calling for his guards, but he may never hear the answers he needed if he did just that so he delayed again. He noticed the Shadow Necrom carried two roses, a red and white one, twisted together, and he recognized the white rose as the one he gave Pluck. Votar inquired, “Told me what?” Malus declared, “Pluck belongs to me. Her life is mine. She belongs to me and only to me. She told me that she gave you



her heart. I've come to claim her heart so that I can have all of her." Malus drew his dagger and said, "I just have to eliminate you and her heart will be mine." "Guards," Votar called out. "No one will be coming to your aid," Malus informed him. "I eliminated those who stood outside your door and the one who was on the balcony." "So you mean to slay me, an unarmed Necrom, and claim what you can never claim?" Votar questioned him. "She had also said her heart was something that I could not take," Malus spoke. "I still do not understand your ways, but I am quick to learn and as for unarmed... You may take up a weapon and defend yourself, not that it will even extend your life one extra mite." Votar quickly moved and grabbed his sword from his bed and returned to the room. Malus patiently waited on him. "Are you ready now?" Malus questioned him. "One who is undeserving of her heart." "You infer that you are deserving of her heart," Votar spoke as he unsheathed his sword. "What makes you deserving of her heart?" "These last few sun's cycles I have been close to her," Malus boasted. "I have even placed my embrace around her so that I am with her everywhere she goes." Votar had no idea the Shadow Necrom spoke of the Sceld robe that Pluck now donned as a cloak. He questioned him, "How does what you said make you worthy of her heart?" Malus started to answer but realized he had no answer, so he merely attacked the Duke. Votar defended himself and was skilled with the sword. Their fight intensified as it went on, and Votar survived past the first mite.

Elsewhere...

Pluck continued to rush to Votar's room as Kabal walked beside her. GuideMa had also followed them and trailed them in the distance. Kabal looked behind them and said, "Gamemnon's Aviatrix does follow you around a lot." Pluck glanced at GuideMa and said, "She is fulfilling Gamemnon's will. Her love for him..." she paused and then told Kabal, "...which is different than the love you have for Gamemnon..." "My love... I believe is hate now," Kabal muttered as the Woman spoke to her. "...has kept GuideMa very loyal to him. I believe she will continue to follow me until he tells her not to." "Were you just talking about me?" GuideMa questioned as she was suddenly right beside Pluck. Kabal let out a startled cry, and then she questioned, "When did you—" "My legs are much longer than yours," GuideMa interrupted her. "Were you talking about me? Were you telling the Duchess of Shangra my role as—" "I was only explaining to her why you are following me," Pluck interjected. "Gamemnon has told you to do so and you do so." GuideMa peered at Pluck, and it didn't seem like she was deceiving her, and then GuideMa looked at the Duchess, and she looked as if she didn't know what was unsaid between them. "It would not matter to me if you did tell her," GuideMa spoke. Pluck glanced at Kabal, and then she said, "If you wish to tell her, you can. I believe it would be safer for you if fewer people knew." Pluck changed the subject by asking, "Did Tabitha safely return to her room?" "Gamemnon escorted her there," GuideMa replied, and then she said, "Where are we going? We did not finish the conversation we were having in the throne room." "You mean..." Pluck began with a grin. "The throne room no one would want to go to." "Yes," GuideMa answered with an added sigh, and then a grin appeared on her face that equaled the Woman's. Kabal noticed that the two of them seemed to be chummier than before. "We were talking about the Throne of Kroth before Sabrina came in," GuideMa stated. "Why didn't you allow Sabrina and Tabitha to fight?" Kabal questioned, ignoring the conversation the Femor wanted to have with the Woman. "One of them might have gotten rid of one of your problems." Pluck upped and stopped, and Kabal and GuideMa walked a couple of paces before they stopped and turned to her. "Duchess, is that

concern I hear in your voice?" Pluck questioned her. "I think it is, but it can't be a concern for me so—" "I am only concerned because you have entangled yourself with my brother," Kabal replied. "I also believe I have... come to the conclusion that you are not my enemy." "You'll make me blush," Pluck told her as she continued once again toward Votar's room. "How would what I just said in any way make you blush?" Kabal questioned as she followed after the Woman. Pluck smiled and remained quiet on the matter. Kabal noticed her little grin and decided not to push the matter. It didn't really matter. "I would really like to talk about the Throne of Kroth," GuideMa said as she noticed the interaction between the Duchess and the Woman was less hostile than normal. "Talk then," Pluck told her. "I would prefer to do so once we are alone." Pluck said, "Nirva was there when we were talking about it the last time." "Yes, but we know where his allegiance lies," GuideMa spoke. "He would never betray his duke." Pluck upped and stopped again, and Kabal nearly ran into her. "Why have you stopped again?" GuideMa questioned her. "And why are you staring at me with that look... that bizarre look on your face?" "You talk of allegiances as if you are on my side," Pluck told her. "You should be very careful." "Me side with you," GuideMa scoffed. "Why would I side with a vile Woman?" "It would be safer if you remained on the side of the Duke of Torlawn," Pluck told her. "Safer for who?" GuideMa inquired. She got all huffed as she asked, "Are you thinking of me? You better be careful where your own allegiances lie. I am always on the side of Gamemnon." "Never betray him," Pluck spoke as she glanced at Kabal. "He can be very unkind to those he does not see as helpful to him and his plans." Pluck continued on, leaving GuideMa and Kabal staring at one another in bewilderment. They turned and quickly followed after her. "It might be best to drop your current topic," Kabal told the Femor. "At least until you understand where your allegiances lie." GuideMa was about to argue the point that she did know where her allegiances lie, but she decided she would drop that topic and move back to another. "Back in the throne room..." GuideMa began. "You should have just let Sabrina and Tabitha battle it out." "Fighting does not solve anything especially fighting that is done out of anger or rage," Pluck told them. "One of them would have gotten hurt or killed and then where would we be? Our forces would have been splintered while the Shadow and the Cursed allegiances remain strong." Pluck upped and stopped again as she muttered, "Splintered." She noticed the other two were just looking at her weirdly, so she started walking again as she said, "We cannot fight amongst ourselves." "You mean until the true Serviatrix is revealed to everyone," GuideMa said. "I mean as I said before," Pluck began as she grabbed the knob to Votar's door. She opened the door and stepped in a few paces as she said, "Fighting does not solve anything especially fighting that is done out of anger and..." Kabal and GuideMa walked in behind her and moved to the side of her when she didn't finish her sentence. They peered at her as Pluck's expression went from weariness to fear to panic and then to anger. Pluck unsheathed the Lux as her eyes crackled with the fury of the Lightning Sword.

Earlier Votar's room...

"You are not that bad of a fighter," Malus told the Duke. "I thought one who lives within a city as grand as Shangra would be soft." "I will not let you have her heart," Votar told him. "I have finally claimed it, and I will not let you have it." "Claimed it..?" Malus repeated as they continued their duel to the death. "I was told a heart could not be taken... the heart is something given." "Claim was the wrong word," Votar spoke as he started to tire. "I loved Pluck the moment I laid eyes on her or that is what I would like to boast. Something attracted me to her but then I

let circumstances harden my love for her," he admitted. "I have finally come to the point where I can freely say that I love her. I have claimed the love she has for me as she has claimed the love I have for her." "Love..." Malus repeated. "It is similar to our word. Pluck is of importance to me." They continued to fight for a few mites more, and they toppled a chair over. Malus cut Votar across the ribs and then shoved him so that he fell backward over the toppled chair. Malus went in for the kill when electricity crackled around his hand that held the dagger. The discharge of lightning traveled up his hand to his arm, making all the fur on his body stand on end. The same odd occurrence was happening to Votar. Malus turned as did the Duke and saw Pluck standing in the other room by the door. She held a hand-and-a-half sword that blazed with blue lightning, and her usually emerald-green eyes were all afire with the blue energy. Malus was mesmerized by the sight and yet frightened by her at the same time. Pluck slowly walked to him, and Malus smiled as he was about to say something to her, but then Pluck charged and swiped at him with her sword. Malus barely had time to bring his dagger to his side to stop her sword from slicing him in half. Pluck immediately turned her body so that she turned in a circle and was coming for his other side. He managed to block that attack but with each of her attacks, something came that was unforeseen. Malus blocked, but Pluck's blade still cut him with tiny lightning slashes that flung from the blade like little boomerangs. His forearm bled and so did the side of his cheek and his upper arm. The awe he had for her trickled away as the peril she put him in fed his fear. Pluck meant to kill him. He could see it in the rage that consumed her eyes. Malus took a great leap back from her, raised his Constraining Dagger so that it pointed at her, and commanded, "Stop! I will take your life if you do not stop!" Pluck charged him again with a wildness that deafened her, and Malus was forced again to defend himself. He had no time to attack only defend and each strike by Pluck's sword, whether or not he defended them successfully, wounded him. He leapt back from her once again and pointed his dagger at her, but this time, he used the power of the dagger. "Stop! Submit to me! I have your life and I will take it!" With one hand, Pluck grabbed at the choker around her neck as it squeezed her throat as if it had fingers. Her face wrinkled in pain and agony but she didn't let up on her attack. She went for Malus again and swiped at him, and he was forced to roll away from her attack. He raised the Constraining Dagger and commanded again, "Submit to me! I own you! You are mine." "I am not yours!" Pluck managed to choke out. "My life might belong to you but I am not yours!" "You are mine! Submit to me!" Malus roared. Kabal and GuideMa rushed into the room where the two males had been fighting. Kabal hurried over to her brother and did her best to stop the bleeding from his wounds while GuideMa watched in horror as Pluck slowly suffocated from the Gold Choker of Fettering. The Woman went at Malus again, but she moved much slower as the choker around her neck squeezed ever so tighter. "I am not yours! I will never be yours!" Pluck declared as she swiped at him, and he easily evaded her attack. "All that belongs to you is my life! All you can have is my life..." She had to steady herself against a wall as she continued for him, speaking softer, "All you can do is take... my... life... away from me." "Submit to me or I will take your life!" Malus declared as he saw what should have been his defy him. "Submit to me!" "No!" Pluck managed to yell and started for him once more as if this would be the last walk she ever took. Malus froze as the False One came near to take his life. It was just like in the Valley of Blood. GuideMa wasn't sure what had happened. One moment she was watching the Woman fight with the Shadow Necrom and the next she had rushed over to the front of Pluck and seized her shoulders with all four of her hands to prevent her from slaying the Shadow Necrom. GuideMa yelled, "Stop this!" Pluck didn't

have the energy to push through the Femor's grasp. All she could do was looked up at the Femor and questioned, "Are you siding with him? Do you also want me to submit to his will?" "I want..." GuideMa began as she looked down at her, and then she said, "I want you to live. I cannot be a Witness to one who is dead. Do as Malus says. Stop trying to kill him." "He was going to kill Votar," Pluck spoke. "He must have come here to kill Votar because of me. I can't let him hurt Votar." "Submit to me and all will be fine," Malus declared as the death that was coming for him was only slowly taking the life of the one whose life he held. "I will never submit to you," Pluck tried to yell at the Shadow Necrom but it only came out as gasps, and then she whispered to the Femor, "I can never submit to him." GuideMa glanced back at Malus, and then she told Pluck, "You must." "I can't." "Are you afraid to?" GuideMa questioned the Woman. Pluck nodded and said, "He will hurt those I love." "Is there more that you are afraid of?" GuideMa questioned and then inquired, "What else do you fear?" "If I submit..." Pluck began. "...I must do his will and his will is to bring the Shadow and Cursed into power and destroy all of Wellspring. Their ways are evil. I can't submit to evil." Malus lifted his dagger higher as he said, "Submit or I will take your life here and then I will take the lives of everyone in this room!" "I already told you," Pluck started as she collapsed to her knees and the Femor knelt with her. "I will not—" GuideMa grabbed the Woman's face with two of her hands as she continued to hold onto her shoulders in fear the Woman would fall to the floor. The Femor pleaded with her, "At least, say you will stop fighting. Tell Malus you will stop fighting if he swears to hurt no one here." GuideMa turned to the Shadow Necrom and asked, "Do you want her to die? If you don't want her to die, tell her you will hurt no one here in the citadel. Tell her and she will not try to kill you anymore." The awe Malus had for Pluck slowly returned as his fear completely evaporated. She was no longer a threat to him... She was only slowly dying in front of him. A threat... He hadn't feared for his own life in such a very long time. It was a feeling he didn't like and yet it made him feel that much more alive. Malus lowered the Constraining Dagger but not the hold he had on Pluck. He moved over to the Femor and the Woman, and he peered down at them. Votar tried to rise as the Shadow Necrom moved over to Pluck. His sister grabbed both of his shoulders and wouldn't let him get up. "Release me," he said. "The Shadow Necrom is going to kill Pluck." Kabal glanced at GuideMa and Pluck, and then she told her brother, "If you should try to stop him now the way you are, we will all die. Let GuideMa talk to him and maybe she can save us all." Malus stared down at Pluck as she glared up at him. The Gold Choker of Fettering didn't affect her in the exact way it had while she was in the woods outside of the Shadow Camp where she blacked out. The choker did squeeze her neck but not as quickly or completely as it had in the woods. The Gold Choker of Fettering was steadily draining the very life from her and it would soon kill her. "I will not kill the Femor or the very attractive female Necrom if you will submit to me," Malus swore to her. "I can't submit to you," Pluck told him as more of her life left her. "I—" "I will kill everyone!" Malus threatened her. GuideMa knew by speaking she was endangering her own life. She told the Shadow Necrom, "And then you will have nothing and I thought you wanted Pluck's heart." "I could just cut it out of her chest once she is dead," Malus stated. "You do not understand and if you do not understand, you will never have her heart," GuideMa told him. "Don't do this," Pluck told the Femor as she urged her more and more to give in to the will of the Shadow Necrom. "I can't submit to him, and I can in no way ever give him my heart." GuideMa ignored her and questioned him, "Do you want this heart we have been speaking of? It is a heart not of flesh." "I want this heart you speak of," Malus answered. "Swear



you will hurt no one within the citadel, and Pluck will sheath her sword,” GuideMa promised him. Malus looked past the Witness to the object of his obsession, and then he said, “I do not believe she has the strength to even sheath her sword let alone hurt me any longer.” Something within him ached as he peered down at the False One. He couldn’t understand what it was only that it was some sort of weakness growing within him. Malus released his hold on the Gold Choker of Fettering, and Pluck gasped for air as he said, “I swear I will not hurt anyone within the citadel as long as she does not raise that accursed sword of her against me again.” “Pluck, do you agree—” GuideMa started to ask her, but Pluck let go of the Lux as she fainted. “Move,” Malus instructed the Femor. “I will take Pluck with me now.” Nirva walked in the open door and saw the Shadow Necrom, and he raised an alert by shouting, “Guards! An intruder! Duke Votar is in danger!” Within half a mite, four Shangra Guards rushed in and another mite later, six Roth monks entered armed with spears or pole-swords. Malus softly growled for the vow he gave to Pluck. Gamemnon entered along with Tabitha and her Roth bodyguard and a few of his Torlawn Guards. Tabitha noticed Pluck was unconscious and rushed to her side, and GuideMa gently laid her to the floor. Tabitha demanded, “What is going on here?” “I am taking what is mine,” Malus said. “Pluck’s life belongs to me.” “You can’t have her,” Tabitha insisted. “Pluck is my servir. Did you not notice my mark?” “Servir...” Malus repeated, glanced at Votar, turned back to her, and muttered, “You are another who has a claim to Pluck.” “I am,” Tabitha answered. “You can’t take her. She is my servir.” More guards and Roth monks showed up, so Malus backed up and went out to the balcony. He mounted his winged creature and said, “I would have simply killed all of you and taken what is mine, but a vow from a Shadow is a vow that can’t be broken.” He addressed Tabitha, “I will take from you what you claim is yours.” Malus turned to Votar, “And I will one sun’s cycle claim the heart that is not of flesh and then all of Pluck will belong to me.” He commanded his beast, and Malus flew away. Tabitha knelt to Pluck and questioned, “Is she hurt?” “I do not know,” GuideMa replied. Tabitha straightened, and then she ordered, “You, guards. Take Alba to my room.” The Torlawn Guards looked at Gamemnon, and he nodded. The guards quickly moved, and one of them carried Pluck off. Votar managed to straighten to his feet as they whisked Pluck away. “She has left me again,” Votar spoke as he couldn’t express the true concern he had for her wellbeing. “Your wound needs to be treated,” Kabal told her brother. Tad walked in alone and said, “I should be able to heal his wound.” Tad walked over to the Duke of Shangra, laid his hands on him, and commanded, “Hold still and while I heal ye, ye’s sister can tell me all that went on in here to create such a ruckus.” Gamemnon waited to see if his friend would be fine, and then he left and his guards with him. GuideMa waited a few mites more, and then she headed after her duke. “What did happen here?” Gamemnon questioned the Femor. “The one I told you of who took Pluck’s life came to claim something from her other than her life and decided he needed to kill Votar to do so,” GuideMa answered. “What did this Shadow Necrom want to claim from Pluck?” Gamemnon inquired, looking for something he might be able to use against the Woman, his old friend, or even the Shadow. “Her heart,” she replied. “Interesting...” he spoke as they walked. “Can Pluck be used as a weakness against this particular Shadow Necrom?” “I do not think so,” GuideMa replied. “I do not think Malus understands what he wants to claim and once he does claim it, if he is able to, will he understand what he will end up having from Pluck?” “The Woman has an interest in this Shadow Necrom?” “I don’t know,” GuideMa answered. “I don’t think Pluck knows for sure. I believe there is some sort of attraction but what that attraction is, I can’t answer you.” He questioned her, “What other

observations have you made since last we spoke?" "It would seem the heart of the Woman has become very important to the Duke of Shangra." "I already know of his interest in Pluck." "His interest has grown," GuideMa informed him. "How so?" "Remember your interest in the Duchess of Shangra?" she questioned. "How you courted her because she was Votar's sister and could be used by you." "I do remember," Gamemnon replied, and then he instructed, "Go on." "Think about your interest in Kabal now especially since Tabitha has come. Do you think about Kabal?" she questioned. "Do you desire to have her by your side? You cast her aside and yet..." "Go on," he urged the Femor when she paused to see if the topic was something he didn't wish to speak about. "You cast her aside but I do believe... What I mean to say is... Your interest in her has changed." "It should," he stated. "I mean to bring Tabitha to power. Tabitha is the true Serviatrix and the daughter of our king. She will one day rule all of the Necrom Kingdom." "Do you mean to wed Tabitha?" GuideMa questioned him. "Wed her? Why would I wed her?" "Don't you want to gain all of the Necrom Kingdom for yourself?" she asked. "I..." Gamemnon started to answer. GuideMa sighed when he didn't finish as if the silence was her answer, and then she said, "It would seem you have given your heart to someone." "Explain." "When I asked you about the wedding, who was the first person you thought of?" Gamemnon asked, "What does it matter who I thought of first?" "Let me answer for you. You thought of Kabal. I have seen your interest in her grow into love. When I mentioned—" He interrupted, "It does not matter who I have given my heart to. I still must bring Tabitha to power so that she can save all of Wellspring. I can't let my love for..." He was about to say the Duchess' name but that would only prove what the Femor had said to be true, so Gamemnon finished with, "I can't let my love for anyone get in the way of that." "I am right then and I am also sorry to say you will have a difficult road ahead," GuideMa told him. "If you want to spare Kabal's heart, you should break all ties with her. Allow her to continue to hate you for what you did to her." "You mean what I did to the two of you," he corrected the Femor. "Are you apologizing for what happened when the earth swallowed me, Kabal, and the Woman?" He considered his answer and then replied, "No. I did what I thought I must. If I was to apologize, I would be implying I would do things differently if I had another chance to do so. I would do nothing different." It hurt GuideMa to hear such a thing but she also expected it. She knew her duke very well. He noticed the Femor's reaction and decided to change the subject slightly by saying, "You do see a lot." GuideMa understood his wishes and spoke no more about the incident where she and Kabal had nearly died by the actions of someone they both cared about. She merely stated, "You did want me to become the Woman's watcher." "I did and you have done well."

Back in the Duke of Shangra's room...

"Let me up," Votar demanded as the Immortal Toadian healed his wounds. "I must go see if Pluck is all right." Tad reached up and flicked the Duke in the forehead and nearly flattened him to the floor, and then he threatened, "Try to get up again before I am done, and I shall knock ye out cold." "I believe you have given me a concussion," Votar spoke as he rubbed his forehead. "Stop ye's whining. Are ye some cub?" "I am not." "Then lie back or I shall do worse than that if ye did not heed my words," Tad threatened. The Immortal Toadian continued to treat her brother as Nirva looked on, and Kabal questioned, "Why are you here and without your Serviatrix?" "I wanted to talk with the False One," Tad replied. She inquired, "Why do you wish to speak with Pluck?" Tad answered, "I have some questions for this False One and more so now that I

overheard that a Shadow Necrom owns her life." "I or my brother will pass on your request," Kabal told him as she was also curious as to what the Shadow Necrom possessed of Pluck.

Some time later...

Tad finished healing the Duke, and then he excused himself and left. "How is Pluck?" Votar questioned as he rose to his feet. Nirva informed him, "I sent one of your guards to check up on her. He should be back shortly to check back in with me." "I couldn't protect her," Votar muttered mostly to himself. "I couldn't protect Pluck. One single Shadow came for her, and I couldn't protect her from just one of them." He questioned his sister and his advisor, "How am I to protect her from a whole army of Shadow?" "I don't have an answer for you, my brother," Kabal spoke. "I might," Nirva stated. "I have been continuing my research into the one we believe is the true Servatrix. Pluck possesses two things that give her an advantage. She has the Mystic Rose imprinted on her back. It was one of the items of magic mentioned long ago. It would seem that it was taken by the Immoral Woman when Man fled Wellspring." Votar stated, "The Mystic Rose didn't protect Pluck from Malus." "I believe that is because Pluck still needs to learn how to use the Mystic Rose," Nirva stated. "I heard Fairah tell her she still needed to train her in its use." Kabal questioned, "What of her sword, the Lux?" "Yes, the second thing she possesses. I also researched the weapon," Nirva began. "It is not an item of magic as I had thought. We have it nowhere in our records. It is such a powerful sword and has an ancient feel to it that it must be in someone's records, so I sent requests out to the other kingdoms beyond our own and none have heard of this sword." Nirva paused, and then he said, "The more I consider the Lux the more I have thoughts that don't make sense. I believe..." "Go on," Votar urged him when his advisor fell silent. "It is almost as if the Lux just appeared for Pluck. It is almost as if the sword doesn't belong to this world."

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Of Gardens And Children Playing**

The Fletching Kingdom...

The Fletching Castle...

The West Garden...

Pepin snuck into the garden where Adroit played. Lady Flaxen and the Morgog Sentinel Brio were there watching over Adroit. Flaxen spotted her and said, "You should leave. The Queen does not want the two of you to play together." "I had to see," Pepin said. "I heard the giant frog had a puppy." "I do," Adroit told her as she showed her the ball of fur. "He plays with me and sleeps with me in my own bed, and he licks my face. I think I am of great importance to him." "Have you named him?" "I haven't," Adroit answered. "I can't think of a name to call him. Do you have any pets?" "No. My mother is allergic so I can't have any at my home, but Auntie has horses and dogs. A trainer takes me out on one of the small horses, and I can play with her dogs at any time." Pepin

questioned, "May I hold him." Adroit handed the puppy over, and Pepin gleefully took him in her hands. "Do you still see me as a pet?" Adroit inquired as the girl played with the puppy. "I still see you as a giant frog, but you are a frog who is the daughter of Empress Virago." Flaxen moved over to them and insisted, "You must leave this garden. The Queen does not wish for you to play with Adroit." "I know," Pepin replied. "I only came to see the puppy." She handed the tiny dog back to Adroit, and then she stood and started out as she said, "I shall leave." Adroit took the ball of fur from her and watched as the Man child left. Adroit wished to play with Pepin but knew until she became of significance to the Queen, she wouldn't be allowed. She watched as the Man child paused, then bent, and reached for a flower, and then Pepin screamed out and grabbed her hand. Adroit ran over to her and asked, "What happened?" "Something bit me," Pepin replied as she pointed to the ground some distance from her. Adroit saw a centipede, then quickly lifted her foot, and stomped on the insect. She hurried over to her friend and took her hand and looked at the small sting. It was already inflamed with poison. Adroit stared at it and all she could think of was to bite her friend. Fangs extended from her mouth and she pulled the hand towards her to sink her fangs in, but then she thought of Virago and knew she must not bite her friend. She retracted her fangs. "Lady Flaxen!" Adroit yelled. "Lady Flaxen, come quickly!" She ran over to them, and Brio followed behind, and Flaxen asked, "What is it?" "Pepin was stung by a Violet Centipede. They're used by the Shadow and very poisonous." "My hand hurts," Pepin cried. "My hand hurts a lot." She fainted, and Flaxen caught her before she crumbled to the ground. "Brio, pick her up," Lady Flaxen ordered. "We need to take her to a physician." Brio lifted the girl into his arms, and Flaxen raced after him. Adroit peered at the crushed centipede, then picked it up, and tucked it into her apron pocket. She scooped up her puppy and raced after the others.

Sometime later...

Queen Jezebel entered her great-niece's room and immediately went to her bed where Pepin laid in the grips of a fever, and Jezebel demanded, "What has happened?" The physician said, "She was stung by an insect." "It was a Violet Centipede," Adroit stated as she looked on with growing concern at the Man child. "Why are you here?" Jezebel demanded. "I am distressed. The one like me but who is of Man is significant," Adroit replied as Flaxen stood behind her with her hands on her shoulders, trying to console her. "What sort of medicine does she need?" Jezebel questioned the physician. "If it was a Violet Centipede, there is no medicine to combat its venom," the physician replied. "The Violet Centipede does not live here. They only live in very hot climates. How could one have come to be in the castle?" Jezebel told the physician, "You have to do something." "There is only one thing we can do," the physician told her. "I can amputate her arm. It may save her but it may also be too late." "Her arm?" Jezebel repeated in horror. "Losing her arm shall devastate her." "She shall most likely die if we do nothing." Adroit took the centipede from her pocket and stared at the insect, and then she ate it. Jezebel looked at her grand-niece who was pale as death, and then she thought long and hard and finally, she said, "Do it." The physician nodded, and then he told the Queen, "You should not be here. You and the other woman should leave. The guard can stay and assist me by holding down the child. I shall need to get my tools." Adroit moved over to Pepin as Flaxen ushered the Queen out of the room and Brio assisted Flaxen. The physician unrolled his tools and began to remove the ones he would need. Adroit peered at Pepin, then peered at her wound, took her hand, and whispered something in her ear. Adroit opened her mouth, extended her fangs, and sunk them into Pepin's



arm over the wound. "Stop her!" the Queen shrieked as she turned for one last glimpse before leaving the room. "Stop that little monster!" Brio and the physician raced over to Adroit and tried to pry her off of the child, but they couldn't budge her. Adroit finished, released Pepin, stepped back from her, and stared at her friend. "What did it do?" the Queen shrieked. "What did the monster do to Pepin?" The physician checked her great-niece's arm as blood flowed out of the two puncture holes Adroit created with her fangs. "What sort of poison did she inject into her?" Jezebel inquired. "She injected no poison," the physician replied, amazed by what he saw. "She sucked out her blood." He placed his hand to Pepin's forehead just as she opened her eyes. "What has happened?" Pepin inquired. "Why is a strange man touching me?" The physician turned to Adroit as he stated, "I believe she sucked out the poison." Adroit started to sway, and then she fainted. She heard Lady Flaxen scream out, and then she heard no more. The Queen rushed to Pepin's side and asked, "Are you all right?" "I am fine, auntie. Though, I think the giant frog bit me. She told me she was going to bite me and that it would hurt, but she would make everything fine. The giant frog said she would do this because I was more significant than her." Pepin seemed to be more awake for she sat up and asked, "Why is the giant frog lying on the floor?" Jezebel took Pepin's hand and kissed it as she replied, "Because you are of importance to her."

\* \* \*

The Fletching Kingdom...

The Fletching Castle...

Edward's room...

The Queen entered after being announced and went straight to the bedroom where Adroit laid on the bed with both of her parents surrounding her. The Child of Shadow never moved. Jezebel inquired, "Has she awoken?" "No," Edward replied. "The physician says there is nothing we can do for her. All we can do is wait and pray that she wakes." "You both look exhausted," Jezebel stated as she looked from Edward to Virago. "You should let some- one else sit with her for a few nals so that the two of you can rest." "I made Lady Flaxen go to her room and rest for she has slept even less than us and there is no one else that I trust. If Adroit should wake, she should be greeted by someone who loves her—" "Or at least by a family member," Jezebel interrupted. "I claim no love for this Child of Shadow but she did save someone I love more than myself. I shall sit with her. I shall even hold her hand while you two go rest and before you tell me no once again, how would it be if you both collapsed from exhaustion and no one was here to greet her when she does wake? Go to the other room. I am having beds set up temporarily." "My mother is right," Edward stated. "We also have an Empire we must consider and we can care for neither if we cannot make wise decisions." He straightened and headed for the door, and Virago started to follow him, when she paused, and said, "I need to speak with your mother." Edward nodded and proceeded into the next room. Virago went back into the room and said, "You may only see a Child of Shadow... You may only see a creature I forced Edward to claim as his child... but I love Adroit as if she was my own child. Can you understand that? She is not mine but I have taken her into my heart." "I can understand that," the Queen said. "There was once a child who came to this castle long ago. I detested her because of an act she had no control over. I detested her so

much I had her stripped of her name. The girl was so small when she first came here, and she had an affection for me, but I would have none of it. What she represented in my mind could not be undone with time, but I was wrong. It was not until she was no more that I realize I had cared for her. My heart betrayed me or I should say my mind betrayed my heart. The girl left this world, believing I hated her." "You speak of Pluck," Virago stated. "Edward told me that Commander Han had lied to me about what really happened to the child. I can understand now, and I shall not condemn the dead for a deed he thought was right. Have you met her?" "I have," Virago replied. "And we have something in common. I hated her because of her appearance and that she wanted my husband's first kiss." "The Kiss? Why would she—" "The Kiss would have broken her curse. I condemned her to a life as a Beast and you withheld your love from her. Are we not a pair?" "At least you are not keeping a secret from her," the Queen said. "Go. Rest. I shall watch over Adroit with as much care as you would." Virago glanced once more at her child, and then she went into the other room. Edward was already lying on one of the small beds they had brought in. She thought about joining him but there was so little room, and they were both exhausted. It would be better if she slept on the other small bed that was right beside his. Queen Jezebel sat in the chair next to the bed the Child of Shadow slept in and as promised, she took her tiny hand into hers. "You are such an odd-looking creature," Jezebel whispered to her. "You would not believe what went through my head when you bit down on my great-niece's arm. I thought you were a monster. All I saw was a monster. The doctor tells me you sucked out the poison and ingested it yourself. The poison is very toxic and it should have killed both of you. The physician said the venom had spread too much through Pepin's body so there was no hope for her and yet she is alive. I believe..." She reached over with her other hand to touch the side of Adroit's cheek but paused and said, "I believe you did more for her because you are an odd creature." The Queen put her hand to her cheek and said, "I have found that my judgment can become clouded. I am not saying I shall embrace you into this family. I am saying..." Jezebel pulled her hand back and placed it on the hand that held the child's small hand and spoke, "I had another physician come in and give me a second opinion. He believes you injected her with something to combat the effects of the venom, and she is recuperating at a very fast rate and has requested to see you. I told her I would think about it. I do not know if I want her associating with someone who is—" "Insignificant," Adroit interrupted her in a sleepy child's voice. "No," the Queen said as she smiled. She started to call Edward and Virago in but decided it would be better if they slept a little longer and so she stayed by the child's side. "You are not insignificant. You are... I am not sure what you are, but you are not insignificant." "Did the one who is like me get better?" "She did. Can you explain to me what exactly you did to her?" "I thought I should bite her," Adroit spoke. "I thought I should bite her when we were in the garden, but my mother said I should not do such things anymore. Later when we were in Pepin's room and I ate the centipede, I realize my body understood the poison and could help her. I believe if I had eaten the centipede sooner and waited a short time before I sunk my fangs in, I would not have gotten sick myself." "You or your people must have a healing gift," Jezebel spoke. Adroit peered down at the hand the Queen held, and she asked, "Have I become of importance to you?" "You keep using this word importance." "The Shadow say that to have someone of importance is a weakness. My mother says it is a strength. I believe my mother is correct. It is of a great power and it makes me feel safe." Adroit reached her other hand over and placed it on top of the Queen's and said, "You are of great importance to me. I

know you see me as... an odd creature," Adroit repeated the words she had heard. "I think you are a very beautiful butterfly." The Queen flushed at hearing the compliment and for some reason, it warmed her heart to hear such a thing. "I do see you as an odd creature," Jezebel told her. "But I no longer see you as... evil. You are a child and one my son has decided to claim as his own. You also saved Pepin and for those reasons, I no longer see you as evil. I see you as... significant." Adroit smiled and said, "Thank you. Where are mother and father?" "They are sleeping in the other room." "Can I see them?" Adroit questioned. "Yes, but let me carry you into them." The Queen picked her up in her arms, and Adroit was much lighter than she appeared. Jezebel carried her into the other room and laid her at her mother's side. Virago woke and kissed Adroit as Edward reached out his hand and took his daughter's. Jezebel left as the family fell asleep.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Way Of Duty Or The Way Of The Heart**

Gamemnon was on his way to Tabitha's room with a few of his guards. He had headed there before but had gone instead to see the head monk to discuss staying a few sun's cycles more. Gamemnon passed Kabal in the hallway. The Duchess of Shangra didn't even acknowledge his presence, so he paused, turned, and spoke to her. "You have been avoiding me since I declared Tabitha the true Serviatrix." Kabal halted, but she didn't turn to him as she replied, "I believe you have declared her more than that." He considered her statement and said, "It is true I have given my loyalty to her. Tabitha is the true Serviatrix, and she will unite our land to be victorious over the Shadow and Cursed." She turned and faced him but said nothing. "You aren't upset over my loyalties," Gamemnon spoke with his growing observation. "I thought you would be since you have sided with the Woman." Kabal started to deny the notion but then again she held her tongue. Gamemnon didn't like her silence and thought of what he and GuideMa had spoken of earlier, and he said, "The earth tremble... You are upset that I left you behind. I thought you had perished." She considered what he said, and then Kabal stated, "You must have wept over my loss for nals." She turned to leave their conversation at that, but then Kabal faced him and asked, "Did you even take a mite to mourn my loss?" Gamemnon considered his answer and decided he should just leave it unsaid. It hurt her more than she expected when he didn't answer her or at least when he didn't try to lie to her. Kabal turned and headed in the direction she had been walking in. "Don't leave just yet," he spoke after her. Kabal sighed, turned, and asked, "Have you already bedded the young female?" "She is too young for my taste," Gamemnon answered. "You have not answered my question," Kabal stated. "I have not bedded the Serviatrix," he answered and then added, "It is not my place to bed her." She wasn't sure how to take his answer and turned and continued on. Gamemnon watched her turn her back on him again, and it pained him even more than the first three times. He had seen a future with Kabal, a future full of their children but then Man came back to Wellspring and everything changed. Love now was only a distraction from what he needed to do. He turned and walked off in the opposite direction, continuing to Tabitha's room.

Tabitha's room...

Pluck blinked open her eyes as her body felt all aglow. She looked at her body and her body was all aglow as Fairah slowly healed her. The Egle Immortal was with her mother. "Ye were reckless," Fairah spoke, and her voice sounded a great distance off. "Ye have been very reckless and blinded by love." "Fairah..." Pluck spoke, and then she fell once again into unconsciousness. The White Lady placed a hand to the side of her daughter's face and said, "Come back to me. Sleep must come later." Pluck felt her mother's love and returned to consciousness. "What do ye remember?" Fairah questioned her. "I..." Pluck began. She thought about it, and then she spoke, "Malus was here, and he tried to kill Votar!" Pluck tried to sit up but her mother prevented her from doing so. "I have to go to Votar! I have to make sure he is—" "He was wounded, but I heard a certain Toadian healed his wound," Fairah informed her, and then she released her daughter. "He was the only one who was hurt thanks to ye but... Ye hurt ye's self in the process. Ye are very reckless." "I was more than that," Pluck said. "I came into Votar's room, and I saw that Malus was going to kill him. I was... I was so angry and filled with rage. I attacked Malus when I could have just—" "I do not believe ye would have stayed the hand of the Shadow Necrom by just talking to him," Fairah said. "Malus sees Votar as a..." "As a what?" Pluck questioned when her mother didn't finish. Fairah answered, "Malus must see Votar as someone he must kill to gain ye's heart." "You heard then," Pluck said as her face burned with embarrassment. "For monks, the Roth do like to talk and talked they did." "I think it was a bad idea to come here," Pluck spoke. "No, ye needed to come here," Fairah told her as she had been so glad to see her daughter safe. "Just do not let rage dictate what ye do. Let ye's heart—" "My heart is why I am in this trouble," Pluck interrupted her. "I gave my heart to Votar, and now Malus wants it. I should just leave." "You are going nowhere," Tabitha insisted as she moved from her chair she had been broodily watching over Pluck from. "My Alba has caused me great worry. I don't worry over anything and you have caused me great worry." "I am sorry, Tabitha." "At least you have remembered my earlier command not to refer to me as your mistress or I would have to think of you as a very unruly servir." "I think I am just an unruly servir, but I will try harder not to be," Pluck said. "Where is Malus?" "He left on his winged creature," Tabitha answered. "He said he will be coming back for you. He can't have you. You are mine." "It might be better for all if I just went with him," Pluck said as she placed a hand to the Gold Choker of Fettering, and then she spoke, "My life is bound to him." "Let me see," Fairah ordered as she waved her hand over the choker. "It is a weapon of Maag-neg, but I also sense another new power about ye." Fairah took a step back and examined the cloak her daughter wore, and then she spoke in surprise, "Ye are wearing a Sceld." "Is that what this thing is?" Pluck questioned. "It belonged to Malus and now it belongs to me... I believe. I am not sure about that part. Is it an evil Sceld?" "Scelds are not evil," Fairah started to explain. "They are creatures that protect their wearer." "Why do you sound so surprised that I have it?" Pluck questioned. "Scelds usually belong to Immortals so why did a Shadow have it in his possession?" Fairah questioned. Pluck said, "I will ask Malus the next time I see him if he does not take my life." "Come, Alba," Tabitha commanded. "You should eat. You have been asleep a few nals and must be famished." "I am very hungry," Pluck admitted. "I really should finish my talk with Votar. We were interrupted... twice now." "Maybe after you eat," Tabitha said. Pluck didn't want to push the issue right away. One, she was very hungry and two, she had to be considerate of Tabitha's wishes. Tabitha and Pluck sat at the table. Fairah excused



herself, and she and SoarOn left. Fairah headed in the direction of her room when SoarOn grabbed her hand so that she would turn to him. "Have ye thought about my proposal?" he inquired. "Shall you travel with me and search for the other Immortals?" "Ye do seem to like to grab me quite a bit," Fairah stated. He lifted her hand and kissed it with his beak, and then SoarOn said, "If I had my way, I would never let go of ye." He paused, and then he asked, "What of my question?" "No," she simply replied. "No, ye shall not go with me or no, ye have not thought about it?" "I have not thought about it," she replied. "So much is going on here. I cannot leave my daughter." "Daughter," SoarOn repeated. "You must love this one called Pluck to give her such an endearing title." "I do," Fairah admitted. "I helped raise her, and she is a daughter to me. I might not have realized it until she was leaving Wellspring, but she is a daughter to me." He took her hand into both of his talons and asked, "And what am I to ye?" Fairah lifted her free hand, put it to the side of his cheek, and answered, "Ye are what ye have always been." "And what is that?" he urged her to say aloud. "Ye are my first love." JuJu had wakened early or late depending on one's opinion if the High Sun was late or not. He had heard about the Shadow Necrom, and the Immortal Necrom was on his way to Tabitha's room to check on Pluck when he came upon the other two Immortals. Neither Fairah nor SoarOn had seen him and for some reason, JuJu hid himself from them as he listened in. "Ye are also my first love," SoarOn admitted to her. "Sun's cycles do not go by that I do not think of ye. Tell me... Why did we never take the pledge and marry?" "I do not know," Fairah admitted. "It always seemed as if something was going on." "I think it was more than that," SoarOn spoke. "One of us was afraid to commit." "True," she admitted. "I was afraid to commit. We are Immortals... Could we have been happy together for an eternity?" "I would have been," he told her. "I would have been." He stroked her cheek, and then SoarOn bent down to her and rubbed his beak against her other cheek in the Egle's way of kissing. They kissed for some time, and JuJu felt as he had when he first saw them kiss outside of the citadel. He waited too long to declare his feelings, and he wouldn't have another chance. JuJu watched them for a few moments more and then turned and left. He needed to think.

Tabitha's room...

The Roth monks brought in their breakfast, and Pluck immediately dove in. She was much hungrier than she realized. She looked up and saw that Tabitha was only staring at her. "Aren't you going to eat?" Pluck asked. "You are going to leave me," Tabitha stated, ignoring her servir's question. "You returned as you promised, but you are going to leave me." Pluck put her utensils down and said, "Yes, I will have to go soon. Malus might have left without me but he will be back for me." "You just returned to me," Tabitha repeated and looked as if she would cry. Pluck didn't know what to say so she spoke, "I am only a servir, an unruly servir who... is wicked and undeserving of your consideration. You can easily replace me. Yes, you should find a servir who is..." Tabitha suddenly stood up, slammed her palms on the table, and yelled, "No! You are my servir and you will remain by my side!" Pluck glanced at Groth, Tabitha's Roth bodyguard, who was the only other person there, and Pluck spoke, "I am sorry." "No!" Tabitha yelled. "You will stay by my side!" Pluck repeated, "I am sorry." "No!" Tabitha shouted and then stormed away from the table. She returned to the table, pointed at Pluck, and commanded, "You will stay by my side! You are my servir..." Tabitha muttered to herself, "Servir is the wrong word. There is a better word." Tabitha marched over to her, and Pluck stood. Tabitha grabbed her by the wrist

and said, "I can't let you go, not with that horrible Shadow Necrom." "I am just a servir." "No, you are mine." Tabitha opened up to her as she said, "I had very little growing up as the Roth King's daughter. It might sound odd to you, but I had been kept from most of the Roths. I had King Malodor's love but there was no one else there for me. He was so busy, and it was so lonely." Pluck wasn't sure how the two things linked, so she only repeated her early phrase, "I am only a servir. You can replace me. You can find another to serve you and you will forget about me." "No..." Tabitha said. She wasn't explaining herself as she wished she could. Tabitha said, "You are more than a servir. Groth, my bodyguard, is my servir because King Malodor gave him to me, but I do not have a fondness for him like I have for you. You are something else to me. Tabitha thought of Kabal and Votar and then she thought of Zenba and Zung. She stated, "You have become like a sister to me." Pluck paused as her own eyes watered. She had touched another heart's as Tabitha had just touched hers. She said, "My family is growing. I have a mother, brother, and now a sister." "Sister... Did you just call me sister?" "Should I not have?" Pluck questioned her. "No, it sounds proper," Tabitha told her. She quickly wrapped her arms around Pluck and wept on her. "I have a sister and Malus wants to take you away from me." Pluck was startled by her immediate affection, but then she embraced the sisterly love Tabitha was giving her and hugged her back as she stroked her head. Pluck once again looked at Groth who looked like he wanted to say something of importance, but he remained quiet. "I have an older sister," Tabitha said. "Older..?" Pluck repeated. "I thought we are of the same age." "You are definitely the older sister," Tabitha said. "I would not tell Gamemnon though," Pluck spoke. "He might become upset." "Let him," Tabitha said. "You are my sister now." She wept some more and then spoke, "And I can't believe you are going to leave me. You must stay by my side." Pluck embraced her new role wholeheartedly and said, "As your older sister, I must protect you, and I have. I must go with Malus when he summons me. Please... allow me to keep protecting you." "There must be a way to save you. There must be a way Malus will release you." Pluck continued to stroke her head, and then she looked and saw Kabal and GuideMa staring at the two of them. "What is going on here?" Kabal questioned. "This does not look proper at all." "Are you also wanting a hug?" Pluck questioned her. "I can give you a hug too if you come over here." "I am going nowhere near you," Kabal told her. "What about you GuideMa?" Pluck questioned her. "Do you—" "Say anymore and I will kill you," GuideMa threatened her. Tabitha had moved and faced away from the two females as she wiped tears from her eyes, and then she turned, faced them, and inquired, "What are you two doing here? And why have you entered my room without permission?" GuideMa spoke up, "Votar has pestered Gamemnon so much about seeing Pluck that Gamemnon wants Pluck to immediately go and see him. I—" "We," Kabal corrected. "We are to escort Pluck to Votar and make sure he has an adequate amount of time with her," GuideMa stated. "Gamemnon does not want to be bothered by Votar like that again." Tabitha directed her question at the Femor, "Why does Gamemnon believe he has a say in what is done with my..." She glanced at Pluck and then said, "My Alba." "Why does our Duke believe he has a say in anything?" GuideMa questioned her, and then she answered, "He just does." "I promise I won't leave until I come and see you again," Pluck told Tabitha. "What sort of promise can you give me that I will believe you?" Tabitha asked. Pluck thought about it, and then she lifted her pinkie and spoke, "I swear by my little finger." "What sort of promise is this?" Tabitha questioned with a giggle. "A promise to bring a smile to your face," Pluck told her. GuideMa leaned to the Duchess and whispered, "Why do I feel ill when I see the two of them on such friendly terms?" Kabal

answered, "I think it is because you are the type of person who is not happy unless a dark cloud is hovering over everyone and right now we are seeing a little ray of sunshine peeking through." "You are not sickened by what you see?" GuideMa inquired. "I see two sides coming together who should be on opposite sides." "For some reason, what I see has brought a smile to my face," Kabal admitted in a whisper. She glanced at the Femor and added, "Did you know that there is a grin on your face?" GuideMa put a hand to her own mouth and answered, "I did not know." "Maybe you live under dark clouds but you prefer a little sun," Kabal told her. "Let's not read too much into a simple twitch of the face," GuideMa warned the Duchess. Tabitha gave in for the moment, reached up with her own pinkie finger, and shook on it as she said, "Return to me and say a proper goodbye." Pluck nodded as she could no longer speak without weeping herself, and she headed past Kabal and GuideMa into the hallway. GuideMa peered at Tabitha and then without another word, she joined the Woman in the hallway. Kabal walked over to Tabitha and asked, "You once saw Pluck as your enemy. How do you see her now?" Tabitha peered at the Duchess for a long time, and then she answered, "As you see her." Kabal didn't like the answer she heard because it reflected more of her own heart than what she wanted to see. The Duchess turned without another word and went out into the hallway.

Mites later...

Gamemnon returned to Tabitha's room and stated, "We need to talk." She nodded and went and sat before the fireplace as her Roth bodyguard positioned himself close to her, and Gamemnon went and sat across from her. "What do you wish to talk about?" she questioned. "Our goals," he replied. "There is much we still need to do to unite the Roth and Necrom Kingdoms. We will need their combined forces to fight the coming... the darkness that is already upon us." "I know," Tabitha said. "I also know of the deal you made with my father, King Malodor. Is there still enough time to put your plan in action? The Cursed have released themselves and the Shadow are already on the move." "We can only pray to the Great Creator that there is still enough time and move forward with our plans," Gamemnon answered. "You did well to subdue the Woman by making her your servitor. Now we only need to focus on Sabrina and once she has been eliminated from the running, you can become Wellspring's Servatrix." "Are you sure I am the one who is meant to be?" Tabitha questioned. "I was so sure when you first told me and my father but now... I ran away when the Shadow attacked us in the Valley of Blood. I feel more of a coward than a savior." "You are the true Servatrix," he spoke with conviction. "Believe in yourself as much as I believe in you." "Do you have such faith in me?" Gamemnon stood, went and knelt before her, took her hand, and said, "I do. I would not have given you my loyalty if I didn't believe you were the one to save us all." "You have also implied other affections towards me," Tabitha said. "I do have a fondness for you," he admitted. "What sort of fondness?" "I am not sure," he replied as he stared into her blue feline eyes. "My heart once belonged to another but I feel my heart also belongs to you, but you are so young." "Does my age really matter?" Tabitha asked. "You are of an age that you can choose, but I meant in my eyes or is it my heart or is it—" "I hear you talking," Tabitha interrupted. "But I don't believe it's you who is speaking. Why have you brought up your heart?" "GuideMa questioned me about it," Gamemnon answered. "Are you in love with the Femor?" Tabitha uttered. He laughed and said, "I have her loyalty and she sees things that I can't. Why do you think I made her the watcher of the Woman?" "What is this Femor to you?" "She is... she is a tool." "I don't think I believe you," Tabitha said. "You put on that you don't care about

others that are lesser than you and yet you are so determined to save all of Wellspring.” She turned from him as her mind returned to her insecurities and said, “I wish I had such faith. Even seeing your faith... Your faith does not lessen my doubts about myself. I wish there was a way to be sure... some sort of test I could complete that would show to all that I was the true Serviatrix...” She thought about her apparent flaw and added, “...to prove that I am no coward.” “I have no doubt that a time will come soon for you to prove yourself,” he spoke, kissed her hand, and said, “Be patient, my very beautiful Serviatrix, and all will be yours. I must now excuse myself from you.” Gamemnon straightened, bowed to her, and left. Groth, the Roth bodyguard, waited a few moments to make sure they would remain alone, and then he said, “You should know something. As you know, I am a servir to our king, and I watch over you as your bodyguard.” “I know this,” Tabitha spoke and asked, “Why do I need to know this?” Groth laughed and said, “No... It is not what I wanted you to know. I want you to know that a servir has a deeper meaning. We are not slaves as you believe. You should find out what a servir truly is.” “Tell me then.” “I can’t without permission,” he stated. “I will seek permission from our king to tell you if you so wish it. Just say the word, and I will send a message by hawk and perhaps your father will grant me permission to tell you.” “Do so,” Tabitha ordered. “I would like to know what I have made Alba if not my slave...” She mumbled to herself, “...if not my sister.”

## **Chapter Five**

### **An Expression Of Love**

Pluck, Kabal, and GuideMa headed for Votar’s room when Pluck upped and stopped and turned to them. She started to say something, but then Pluck stopped herself, turned, and started to continue to walk. “Do not do that,” Kabal told her. “If you want to say something or ask something, just do so. It is worse for us to wonder what you were going to say.” GuideMa stated, “I really do not care what the Woman was going to—” “Quiet, you, and do not lie. I saw.” “You saw what?” GuideMa angrily questioned as she turned to the Duchess. Pluck turned back around and faced them and then put a hand up as if to stop them from arguing, but it was already too late. Kabal told the Femor, “I saw what you did the last time we were in my brother’s room.” “What did I do?” GuideMa questioned as she had no idea what the Duchess was talking about. “You...” Kabal started, glanced at Pluck who still had her hand up, and then answered, “You stopped Pluck from killing herself.” “I did no such thing,” GuideMa insisted. “You did. I saw you do so,” Kabal spoke. “Pluck would not have stopped attacking the Shadow Necrom and would have died if you had not convinced her to stop.” GuideMa peered at Pluck, turned her attention back to the Duchess, and said, “I do not wish to talk about this anymore. The Woman had a question for us. Did you not, Pluck?” “Do you now care what Alba has to say?” Kabal questioned the Femor. GuideMa ignored the Duchess and said no more. Pluck felt the tension between the two females, so she said, “I do have a question for you, Kabal. You called me by Alba again. You had told me you called me Alba because it really isn’t a name. You said it’s more of a curse, and it means one who is hated and despised by all. I now know what Alba means. It is a rose. I also know that my name before it was taken from me was Alba.” Pluck paused, searching the Duchess’



face for an answer, and then she asked, "Why do you call me Alba?" Kabal just stared at Pluck unable to think of anything to tell her. "Just tell the Woman," GuideMa spoke. "Tell her why you call her by that name. Be done with it and do not let it hang over you like some..." The Femor used the Duchess' own words when she added, "...dark cloud." Kabal glared at the Femor in such a way as to show her she was not grateful in the least. GuideMa said, "This is something you two need to talk about. I will wait for the two of you up aways." She walked ahead of them, leaving the two of them just staring at each other without either one of them knowing what to say. After about a mite of silence, Pluck said, "You don't have to tell me. We can just continue to your brother's room and—" "Do you remember when we were in the belly of the Gargantuan Worm?" "I do," Pluck replied. "I had a strange dream then," Kabal spoke. Pluck remembered her own dream, wherein, Votar had kissed her. She put a finger to her own lips as she remembered that dream. "In my dream," Kabal began, pulling the Woman from her thoughts. "I traveled to a place where Man lived, and I saw a small girl there named Alba. She played with a doll on a pew inside what looked like a church. She told the doll she would be her mommy and that she knew what it was like to have no mommy or daddy. I thought to myself at the time what a poor wretched creature. A sound outside drew Alba's attention, so she stood, walked to a window, and raised up on her tippy toes to peer out. She looked all around until she discovered the source of the soft cries for help. Alba went outside and headed for the source of the frightened cries as I was drawn behind her like some peeping ghost. Alba stopped before a tree and peered up, seeing a small creature stuck on one of its lower branches. I also looked at where the helpless ball of fur called out. I had never seen this type of creature before and felt for the small thing's plight more so than the poor wretched creature before me. I wanted to help it, but I had no ability to do so. Alba quickly climbed up the tree and rescued the furry creature." Kabal lied, not ready to admit to anything just yet and said, "I was concerned for the small thing and wished with all my heart I had the ability to help it, but I watched on helpless to do anything but be a spectator." Kabal started to say 'The courageous' but left those words out as she said, "Alba started to climb down when one of the branches broke under her weight and sent her tumbling to the ground. She landed on her back, cradling the small creature. I rushed over to them and knelt beside them, deeply concerned for the..." Kabal left another word out. She left 'brave' from her retelling as she said, "...young Alba and the helpless creature she held. I saw that they were both fine and felt immensely relieved." "Why are you telling me this?" Pluck questioned her. Kabal wanted to tell her not to interrupt her, but the Woman had a right to know. The Duchess replied, "I wouldn't admit it, not even to myself, but I came to care for this orphaned female who was brave and courageous. I realized this in the dream. I put my hand to my chest to steady my nerves which had been set on end when I thought Alba had hurt herself in the fall. Thankfully, Alba only had the wind knocked out of her. I took a few more moments to steady my nerves, and then I looked more closely at the small creature Alba held. At first, I thought she held a baby Necrom. The creature was much smaller than a baby Necrom and made purring sounds as Alba stroked the creature's head. Alba lay on her back for some time, catching her breath. A group of adult females made their way toward the courtyard, and Alba hid behind the tree. She waited until they passed, and then Alba came out of hiding. She set the small creature on the ground and petted its head one last time. I wasn't sure why I was shown this child's life, but then I went with her as she rode in the carriage. I witnessed a ceremony where Alba's name was taken from her by the Queen of Fletching as if by force, and the small child wept. Alba was later presented to a boy named

Prince Edward, and he and the others started calling her girl from that point on. I felt for Alba as she was stripped of her identity. Time flashed forward, and Alba and Prince Edward were returning from a trip with many adult males. A High Guard named Commander Han gave Alba her new name, and I was shocked to hear it. Han told Alba that her new name meant resourceful courage and daring in the face of adversity and from that point on, I watched with interest.” “You were seeing me,” Pluck said, shocked to hear such a secret revealed to her. “The dream you had while in the giant worm was about me.” Kabal didn’t answer her. She just kept on with her story and said, “I looked on as you saved the Prince from a curse meant for him. I watched as you transformed into the form you possess now. I witnessed how you were despised by all who saw you. My heart had gone out to Alba, but I didn’t want to feel anything for I knew it concerned you, one I despised. Your story played on as if it was being told to me. So much had been taken from you and you already had very little in this world. Much was stolen from you because of one selfless instance of love and because of many enduring acts of hatred.” Pluck wanted to say something but she didn’t have the words. “Time flashed forward again in my dream,” Kabal continued. “You were much older, and you lived and trained in the temple where you had been cursed. You lived there under the protective watch of Fairah and the rigorous training of Han. I got a sense that you were very happy with your existence. You had two people in your life that loved and cared for you. I know this because I witnessed the tender moment between you and Fairah as the two of you said goodbye in the temple, and I also witnessed the tender moment between you and Han moments before his fatal wound killed him. Once again, I watched as what little you had was taken from you, and the only thing that remained was a promise of the Prince’s first kiss. I was rooting for you by then, and I watched in horror as you went to claim your reward for saving both the people of Fletching and Morgog. The dream made me no longer a bystander but an active participant in the grief and anguish that you felt as you witnessed the Prince give the Kiss to the Princess. I wanted to murder the Prince and Princess for what they did to you. I wanted to hurt them for hurting you. I cried for you. I had never really been close to someone other than my brother and romantic interests. I never had someone I could call...” Kabal couldn’t say friend as she was still so ashamed of how she had treated Alba. “You dreamed all of that?” Pluck asked. “What I experienced seemed to take a lifetime for me to see and feel. Whoever sent me that dream was cruel,” Kabal answered without really answering. “In what way.” “I was content hating you once I discovered you were a woman.” Pluck questioned her, “But why did you say my name meant—” “Did you think I wanted to admit to a vile Woman all I had experienced to learn of your true name?” Kabal interrupted her. “Ofcourse I lied to you. You shouldn’t expect anything else from me. You are a woman who I despise and someone unworthy of my brother.” Pluck thought about what she said, and then she asked, “If this is true, why do you still call me Alba?” “I... ah...” Kabal spoke, trying to think of another lie. “It’s fine,” Pluck told her as she saw how hard it was for the Duchess just to admit to her the dream she had. “We can just leave it where it is. You can continue to despise me and I will... I will continue to—” “Quiet you!” Kabal snapped at her. “You have your answer. Say no more about it. Go see my brother before he sends out all of his guards after you.” Pluck nodded and headed after GuideMa. Kabal stood there for a short time and then started to follow when she noticed someone’s shadow in the distance. She looked in their direction and then followed after the Woman. The Woman walked up to GuideMa, and the Femor asked, “What did the Duchess tell you?” “Tell me..?” Pluck repeated as she considered everything she had been told. “Kabal explained to me... I’m not

sure." GuideMa watched the Woman struggle to find meaning in her conversation with the Duchess, and then the Femor said, "There is something wrong with your eyes." "What do you mean?" Pluck inquired as she wiped one of her eyes. GuideMa sighed as she was forced to ask, "Have you been crying?" "I have so many times this sun's cycle, and I do not know if I can take anymore." Pluck looked in the direction she was heading and said, "Maybe I should delay seeing Votar right now." "Is that what you want?" GuideMa questioned her as she started to walk so that the Woman would walk also. "I don't know what I want," Pluck honestly replied as she also continued forward. Kabal hurried and caught up to them. "I'm not convinced by your answer," GuideMa said as she hurried her pace and pressed them forward, and then she asked again, "Are you sure that is what you want?" "What I want?" Pluck repeated. It had been so long since she considered what she actually wanted. Her heart overrode her mind, allowing a sense of urgency to take over, and she answered, "No, I have to see him." She rushed forward. "I have to." They reached Votar's room, and Pluck opened his door, rushed in, and wrapped her arms around him, embracing him with all that she had. GuideMa slowly followed and waited by the door. Kabal also entered, and then she stated, "I think I will go now. I do not need to see this." The Duchess left and shut the door, and then GuideMa muttered, "Sadly as the Witness... I do need to see this. I wish I did not need to. I really wish I did not need to. It is like I have become one who prowls around peeping in other's windows." Pluck embraced Votar for a long time, and then finally she said, "There is something I must ask of you." "Name it and you will have it," Votar told her. "I have already given you my heart and half of my city." "I want you to promise me something," she repeated so that he understood how important it was. He wondered why she just didn't come out and say what she wanted him to promise, so Votar questioned, "What does this promise entail?" "I want you to leave the Shadow Necrom alone," she replied. "If he appears again, I want you to immediately call your guards. I want you to promise me that you will never face him alone again." "Are you afraid that he will kill me?" Votar questioned her. "Are you afraid that my skills alone will not save me?" "I am," Pluck admitted as the thought of losing him caused a great sorrow to rush over her. It was a sorrow that dragged her down toward despair. She couldn't see a life without Votar, and Pluck told him, "Malus means to kill you if he is given another opportunity." She pulled from his loving arms, took both of his hands, and said, "I would die if you died. I have to know you are safe. I have to know that I gave my life away and you will be safe because of it. I can't have you go after him once I leave. My sacrifice can never be the reason any harm comes to you. I wouldn't be able to take it. I have endured so much but I would plummet into despair if you should die." He listened with his heart, but Votar also listened with his mind and spoke, "You are saying more than that. You are saying you don't want me to come and rescue you. You want to remain with that Shadow Necrom once he takes you away from me again." "I am saying that," Pluck admitted. "Promise me this or I will leave this very moment and you will never find me. I want you to swear this to me or I will leave this very mite and all you will remember of me is that I left in anger and heartache." She pleaded with him, "I can't spend my final moments with you if I think even for one moment that you will risk coming after me. You must let me go and you must support the Serviatrix." "You are the true Serviatrix," Votar told her as he tightly held onto her hands so that she would never leave him again. "How can I support you if I allow you to be taken by that Shadow Necrom? They will destroy you. I can't allow that to happen." She looked down at their hands as she felt the desperation and love flowing from them. Pluck peered up at him and told him, "You have to decide right now what is more

important. Do you want to save Wellspring or do you want to die trying to save me?" "It is not written that I will die," he told her. "I could succeed and we could be together." "Wellspring or death?" Pluck repeated as if she could see the future. "Please... Stay and support the Serviatrix." He saw the determination in her emerald-green eyes and nodded. "Pledge the oath she said. Say it aloud so that I know you mean the vow." "I will not come after you when the Shadow Necrom takes you and if I ever see this Shadow Necrom, I will not face him alone but call upon my guards." "Thank you," Pluck said. "Now my mind can be at ease and allow my heart to enjoy our last moments together."

Over by the door...

GuideMa heard scratching and opened the door to find the young Lunar Flytrap wanting to come in. "Stay there for now," she ordered him. "You do not need to come in." He whined, then circled around, and sat just outside. GuideMa shut the door and turned her attention back to the two lovers.

Within the room...

Votar stared deep into her eyes as if searching for something of great importance, and then he asked, "Which one?" Pluck looked at him as if she didn't understand his question. "Which am I to support? Tabitha or Sabrina?" Pluck smiled at him and said, "Support the Serviatrix. You will know. You have supported her for so long already." He didn't understand her meaning, but he also didn't want to waste any more of their time talking about it. Votar told her, "I have made my vow, and I will abide by it, but I don't think I can let you go. You are life to me. I knew the moment I thought you were lost to me forever when Gamemnon came back in the Valley of Blood without you or my sister." What Kabal had told her earlier still rung through her ears, and Pluck muttered, "Just do not tell me you had a dream about me. I don't think I can endure another's retelling of a dream they had about me." "Dream..." Votar repeated. "No, I had no dream." She closed her eyes thankful for at least that. Pluck opened her eyes and stared at the one who had confessed his love to her at the Cascade Terrace before the Aqua Falls but that memory was bitter-sweet for that very place he also confessed his hatred for her. She had so many memories of her and Votar and many of them were harsh and unrelenting in devastating animosity. Pluck wanted to grasp memories she could take with her once the Shadow did claim her again. She wanted to grasp memories that would overpower all the dark ones she had. Pluck wanted to surrender to Votar's love, but she had been so afraid. She looked at his lips... the ones she had dreamed about. Pluck convinced herself to surrender to a love she could only embrace for a few moments and leaned up to kiss Votar. She moved to press her lips against Votar's and...

Outside in the hallway and earlier...

Kabal shut the door to her brother's room, stepped back from it, and stared at it for a long time. She turned and headed back to where she had spotted the shadow. No one was in the area, so she walked around until she heard something out on one of the balconies that connected to the hallway. A winged creature was out on the balcony, fluttering its wings. Kabal went up to it and stopped a distance away as she eyed the creature, and it eyed her back. She couldn't quite make out what it looked like as if its image was distorted. She walked up to it, and the creature lowered

its head to her. Kabal petted its head. "Where is the one who rides you?" she questioned the bird-like beast. "I am here," Malus replied as he came up behind her. "I thought you had spotted me before. Usually, others do not spot me." Kabal was afraid of him, but she didn't let on as she replied still with her back to him, "I did not really see you. I only saw your... shadow." Malus chuckled, "I have never heard of a Shadow Necrom's shadow betraying them." He walked up closer to her as the female Necrom turned and faced him. She was definitely afraid of him, but she tried to mask her fear from him. He questioned, "Why did you seek me out? I notice you brought no guards with you." "I don't know," Kabal replied. He lunged for her, and she let out a cry but tried to muffle it with her hands. Malus whispered into her ear, "Do you believe because I vowed to Pluck that I would hurt no one within the citadel that I will not kill you? I could merely whisk you away on my beast and drop you to the ground far beyond the citadel." "I believe..." Kabal began and then paused to quiet her trembling voice, and then she said, "I believe if you wanted to kill me, I would be dead the moment you desired it." "Desire... What would those who are not of the Shadow know of desire?" Malus questioned her. "Desire is not a foreign word to me, and it is a word that also belongs to those of..." Kabal paused and questioned, "We see you as Shadow and you refer to yourselves as Shadow, what do you call those of us who are not of the Shadow?" "We call you food," Malus replied. Kabal forced herself to remain standing as every fiber of her being fainted in fear. "What do you want from me?" Malus questioned her again. "I still don't know," she admitted. "What do you want?" "I have come for the False One. It is time that she returned to me. We have plans for her." "We... You mean the Shadow. What plans do you have for Alba?" "Alba..? Does the False One have another name besides Pluck?" he questioned, and then he thought about the red rose he had given Pluck. Malus moved over to his saddle and started to remove the two roses that were intertwined, but then he paused and said, "You were petting my beast. He does not like anyone and he barely tolerates me and yet he let you pet him." "Beasts do seem to take to me," Kabal said as she touched her long platinum hair where two stowaways were hiding. "Do you see me as a beast? Do you think I will take to you? I take what I want." Malus threatened, "If I want you, I will take you." He removed from his saddle the white and red rose that were intertwined and gave them to Kabal. She took the flowers and started to ask, "Why—" "They are not for you," Malus told her. "They are for Pluck. Give her these roses and tell her she must choose. The rose she abandons is the one she will not give her heart to." "What will you do to the one who gave her the white rose?" Kabal questioned, recognizing the flower her brother had given the Woman. "I will kill him either way," Malus replied. "The life I own will not belong to anyone else in any way no matter what piece it is of her. Pluck belongs to me," he declared. "Though... the one known as Votar is not the only one I must eliminate. I believe one of the Serviatrixes has a claim to what is mine." "You have learned quite a bit since coming here," Kabal spoke. "Most ignore shadows..." he replied, and then he remembered what this unusual but very attractive female Necrom had done. He stared at her very rare platinum hair so rare he had never seen it on another Necrom other than her brother. She also had black fur that suited her well. Malus' thoughts returned to what she had done, and he added, "Most do not chase after shadows." She informed him, "I am definitely not most." "Go now... Deliver the roses," Malus ordered her. "Before I go," Kabal spoke as she smelled both of the roses. "I would like to talk about desire a little longer." She waited to see if the Shadow Necrom would tear into her that very moment for defying one of his orders and when he only looked at her, Kabal said, "Pluck is very valuable to my brother. Is there anything you would



exchange for Pluck's life?" "No, there is nothing as valuable as the False One." "Carefully think about it," Kabal told him. "Is there nothing in all of the world that you would want? My brother would offer you as much gold as you could desire." "There is one thing... I have her life but I want her heart," Malus answered, and then he said, "I believe as I have observed the False One more and more the most valuable thing is her heart." "You own her life. Does it have no value?" "Her life," Malus spoke as he thought about it. "Her life has some value as the False One." "Her heart has great value but not her life," Kabal spoke. "When we speak of the heart, I do not think we are speaking of the same thing." "Our ways and your ways are very different." "I will deliver the roses and your message," Kabal told him as she considered his words, and then she turned and quickly headed off. "Wait," he called after her. "You purposely sought me out," Malus declared and then questioned once she turned to him, "Do you also have a claim to what is mine? Do you own a piece of Pluck?" "Own a piece?" Kabal repeated in a laugh. "The vile Woman... Why would I want to own anything of her? Unless you consider pieces of her hide as property that can be owned." "Explain what you mean," he commanded her. Kabal smelled the roses again which had very fragrant scents, and then she said, "Have you not seen the scars on her back? I gave those to her. I have my flesh..." She thought about what almost happened under her orders. If Nirva had not come into the courtroom back in Shangra and stopped Pluck's punishment, the vile Woman's... the vile Serviatrix's back would have been shredded into unrecognizable flesh. "I have what is mine. I have her scars." Kabal considered how he must possess all of Pluck, and she questioned him, "Do you want them? I can easily hand over my possession of them to you. Do you want her scars?" "I want all of her!" he roared at the female Necrom, but Malus wasn't sure where his thunderous reply came from. He felt agitated about something, but it wasn't because this unusual female Necrom claimed ownership of Pluck in one way. It was more like he was upset about something, but he ignored the strange feelings that only brought on more strange feelings. "I will consider claiming these scars from you, but I desire to think about it some more." "Why do you hesitate?" Kabal inquired even after terror had besieged her when the Shadow Necrom roared at her. "I thought you wanted all of her." "I am not sure," he admitted. "I want all of her but these scars... They seem different than the heart I want." Thinking about it only made him more frustrated, so he said, "No matter... I will soon have all of Pluck." This time he turned and left her behind as he returned to his winged beast. Kabal watched him leave, and then she headed back to her brother's room. Fulgor, the Globe Spore that had come from the Mystic Rose, moved out of hiding from behind Kabal's ear. The male Calico Winsome Kit rode on top of him as the Winsome Kit sleepily yawned. "You two were no help whatsoever," Kabal told them. "Here I stood before a Shadow Necrom and all you two did was sleep." Sensing her uneasiness, Fulgor rubbed his fur-like body up against her cheek. Kabal put a hand up to him and the Calico Winsome Kit who started to purr. "I can't be mad at you two for too long," she told them. "Come..." Kabal lifted the roses as she said, "I have a message to deliver to Alba."

Votar's room...

Pluck moved to press her lips against Votar's and... GuideMa had moved and stood closer to them, and the Femor cleared her throat, causing Pluck to pause and look at her. GuideMa shook her head. Pluck wasn't sure why she was shaking her head. Votar noticed the interaction between the two and inquired, "What is going on?" "You see..." GuideMa started. "There is this thing that we—" "We? No, you must go and Pluck is staying with me," Votar said as he headed for

the door to show GuideMa out. "Go now." Votar opened the door and started to say, "I will return Pluck once we—" "Actually," GuideMa interrupted him as she followed him, and Pluck joined them by the door. The Femor grabbed the Woman by the wrist and pulled her to follow her as she started out the door. "We have someplace very important to be." "Where?" Votar inquired. "What is so important?" "We..." GuideMa started as she looked all around the hallway for a reason, and then she spotted one. "We must feed my steed. You would not want him eating someone in the citadel." Pluck followed along as GuideMa continued to drag her through the hallway. The Lunar Flytrap barked at Votar and then ran after the two females wagging his plant-tail. Votar stood in his doorway and said, "She left me. Pluck has left me again. Is this what our relationship will be like? Will I always be left behind?" GuideMa dragged Pluck for some time, and then Pluck said, "You can let go of me now. We are far enough away." The Femor released her, and Pluck inquired, "Why did you pull me away?" "Do you remember what happened in the woods outside of the Shadow Camp?" Pluck thought about it, and then she answered, "Three of the Shadow nearly killed me and..." She placed a hand to her throat and added, "I nearly died by this choker." "You stopped breathing, and Malus revived you by placing his mouth over yours," GuideMa informed her. "I did not realize that was how he brought me back. Why did you pull me away from Votar and bring me out here to tell me this?" Kabal walked up and joined them, and the Lunar Flytrap walked over to her and licked her hand. Kabal patted the top of his head. GuideMa answered the Woman, "Malus, in essence, kissed you." Pluck was so shocked she didn't say anything. GuideMa glanced at the Duchess, not sure she should continue, but then she went ahead and said, "When Malus kissed you, you became... you reverted to your true self." "My true self?" Pluck spoke, and then she gasped as she asked, "Do you mean I transformed into a woman?" GuideMa nodded. Pluck touched her own lips with the tips of her fingers and spoke, "Edward's First Kiss was supposed to break my curse, but I wasn't sure if any other kiss would break it. You said I changed and Malus saw my true form?" "I did," GuideMa answered. "You also reverted back before a mite had passed, so I don't believe any of the other Shadow saw. I don't know if Malus told anyone that you are of Man." Pluck turned her back on the two females as she had to think over everything that had been revealed to her. She finally understood why the Femor pulled her away, and she stated, "You were afraid I would transform into a Woman if Votar kissed me." The scene that almost happened in Votar's room played in her mind, and Pluck said, "More than that... You were afraid of Votar's reaction if he saw my true form." She walked over to GuideMa and said, "Thank you. I don't think I could have taken his rejection even if it had only been for an instance. I will not be able to kiss Votar until I have had time to sit down with him and explain... I don't even know what I would need to explain." "You sound like you are still going to take my brother up on his offer to wed you," Kabal said. "I can't wed him," Pluck spoke without looking at the Duchess. Kabal asked, "Do you intend to kiss him and leave him brokenhearted? Pluck noticed the Duchess held the white and red rose, and Pluck ignored her question and ask one of her own, "Has Malus come for me?" "Not yet," Kabal replied, not liking the Woman ignored her question. "He does want you to choose." "And I thought I already had," Pluck muttered to herself. "I guess he saw right through my ruse." "He intends to kill my brother no matter what you choose," Kabal informed her. "I also believe he intends to kill Tabitha. He knows that you are her servitor." "He would kill all of you if he only understood," Pluck spoke mostly to herself. "I don't know what to do. If either of you has any suggestions..." GuideMa and Kabal glanced at one another, and then they shook their heads. "Maybe I only need to keep

looking for the Serviatrix Prophecies,” Pluck said as she noticed the Lunar Flytrap. “I will leave most everyone behind and travel. Malus can come and find me once he wants to reclaim me.” Kabal questioned her, “What will you do once you run out of prophecies?” “I don’t know.” “Do you believe leaving will keep my brother safe?” “No,” Pluck replied. “But if Malus has to chase after me because I flee from here, maybe your brother will be safe for now.” “If that is what you want to do...” GuideMa began, “...let us go talk with Tad. He wanted to talk to you as the False One. Maybe he can give us a direction to start in as you... run away.” “Why are you going with her?” Kabal questioned the Femor. “Because I am,” GuideMa started. “I know what my role is, and so I must play it.” “Your role,” Kabal repeated. “What about the roses?” “I won’t choose,” Pluck told her. “Give them back and tell Malus...” Pluck realized what she was instructing the Duchess to do, and she nearly yelled, “No. Don’t see him again.” She moved over to Kabal and said, “He is very dangerous. You should not have seen him. How did you end up speaking with him? Did he track you down? Did he try to hurt you? Why would he track you down?” Her mind whirled with dozens of possibilities as she angrily questioned her, “Why don’t you have guards with you? All of you must have guards with you at all times. I have to tell Votar...” Pluck knew she couldn’t face him again at least not yet, so she focused on the Duchess and said, “What did you intend to do? You could have gotten hurt or killed.” “You would be in a mess then,” Kabal spoke as she didn’t like that the Woman was yelling at her. She shouted back at her, “I might have died because of you. If that had happened, how could you tell my brother that your troubles are why I am dead?” Pluck took a step back from the Duchess. She just wanted to flee from the thought that anyone she cared about might be hurt by Malus. Kabal’s question only confirmed that leaving the citadel was the best option. Pluck looked at GuideMa, and then she turned her attention back to the Duchess and said, “You are right. You might have died because of me, but it would have been much worse than that. How could I have told myself that I am to blame for your death?” Pluck took another step back from her as if separating herself from everyone, and then she told the Duchess, “Don’t ever put such a burden on me again. You should know... I am weak and frail. I can handle so little. Promise me you will go nowhere near the Shadow again.” “I will make no promise to a woman,” Kabal spoke. “How dare one such as you even ask something like that of me. I have a mind to—” GuideMa laughed, interrupting the Duchess, and then the Femor said, “I believe the Woman just said that you matter to her so don’t be a dunce and do something stupid like that again.” Kabal turned her attention to the Femor, already knowing what the Woman was implying. It was half the reason she was so upset. Kabal wanted to snap at the Femor, but all she could manage to say was, “Look who’s talking when it comes to affections.” GuideMa’s smirk disappeared as she spoke, “I will quiet my tongue if you will do the same.” “Agreed,” Kabal answered. Pluck looked from one female to the other as she wasn’t sure what was going on between them, and then she said, “You two have become better friends.” They both looked appalled by her statement. “We would have to be friends first before we could be better friends,” GuideMa informed the Woman. “We are just not enemies... at the moment.” “The Femor is correct,” Kabal spoke. “I am as much of a friend to the Aviatrix as I am to you.” Pluck tilted her head as she tried to wrap her thoughts around what the Duchess had said. She knew they were friends by how they treated one another. GuideMa sighed, and then she said, “We should be going. We still need to meet with the Immortal Toadian.” Pluck nodded and headed off by herself. She wanted some time alone just to think and she might only have a mite to do so. “You said you saw the Woman’s true form?” Kabal questioned the Femor once

Pluck was some distance from them. "What did she look like? Was she hideous?" "She is beautiful for her kind but no less vile," GuideMa replied. "The Shadow Necrom saw her true form?" "I wondered if you overheard," GuideMa said and then answered, "He did." "You look concerned," Kabal spoke and then asked, "Is Alba's life in danger now that he knows?" "I don't know about her life but her heart..." GuideMa turned to the Duchess and said, "Pluck is afraid she might succumb to the dark charms of this Shadow Necrom." "She said that?" "No," GuideMa replied. "Pluck admitted there was some sort of attraction to him." Kabal asked, "Why did you tell me this?" The Femor turned and looked in the Woman's direction and replied, "I am also afraid for her. We... should be afraid for her."

## **Chapter Six**

### **Immortal Hearts**

In another part of the citadel...

"Fairah," SoarOn called out to her in one of the hallways. She turned and paused and waited on him, and then they walked together. "How is ye's daughter?" SoarOn questioned. "I heard she had an encounter with one of the Shadow." "Pluck is fine now, but I am very concerned," Fairah said. "She has the Gold Choker of Fettering that a Shadow Necrom named Malus placed upon her. He..." She turned to the Egle and asked, "Do ye know of anything that can combat the effects of items that fetter or bind?" "I do not," SoarOn replied. "Ye were saying something about the Shadow Necrom." "I was... Malus came to kill the Duke of Shangra, and my daughter, Pluck, was careless in the way she handled it and was injured." SoarOn questioned, "What do ye mean?" "I was told Pluck attacked the Shadow Necrom even though he used the power of the choker on her," Fairah replied. "An item of fettering binds her and yet she caused this Shadow some problems? Interesting..." SoarOn spoke, considered the meaning behind it if there was any meaning, glanced up, and saw her staring at him, and he said, "I am glad to hear that she is doing well. I do not know this Pluck, but I do know how much she means to ye." "Thank ye. She does mean a lot to me. Pluck means quite a lot to me," Fairah stated, and then she asked, "How goes the search for the Immortals? Ye had told me ye came to the citadel because of a rumor." "I did, but now I believe the rumor was concerning ye, Tad, or JuJu. I shall be leaving in the next sun's cycle or two towards my next destination. Would ye like to come with me?" "I believe it is very important that we gather all of the Immortals and find out what has happened to those who have disappeared..." "But..." SoarOn added when she didn't finish. "I believe Pluck needs me more than ever." "Need ye as an Immortal or needs ye as a mother?" SoarOn inquired. "Both," Fairah answered. "I really like this mother side of ye that I am seeing," he said. "Us Immortals cannot have children, and I did not think I wanted to adopt any children." SoarOn asked, "What made ye change ye's mind?" "Pluck adopted me. Circumstances placed her in my care, and she immediately took hold of both of my hands and my heart." "I heard she is referred to as the False One," SoarOn spoke. "I hear she has also accepted her role as the False One." "She has, but I still see her as the true Serviatrix," Fairah answered. "I believe Pluck shall be the one to save

Wellspring.” “Tell me more about ye’s daughter. Tell me about this circumstance that brought her into ye’s life. And does she fulfill much of the prophecies?” Fairah began her tale of how Pluck came into her life and what she knew of the prophecies she had fulfilled.

Sometime later...

“Ye must not have wanted her to leave ye when she first left with her prince,” SoarOn spoke once Fairah had finished. “I wish to stay by her side always, but I have this feeling I am destined to be far from her for a very long time.” “We need to make sure ye can spend much time with her,” SoarOn said as he smiled. “Come with me. Travel with me as I look for those Immortals who are lost or just hidden or trapped. If we can bring us all together again, we can defeat the Cursed and Shadow and the Serviatrix shall no longer be needed. Ye can stay close to her and spend time with her as a mother should.” “Do ye believe she is the true Serviatrix?” “I believe because ye believe,” he replied as he took her hands. “Come with me.” “I would like to go with ye. Finding the Immortals and bringing us all together would help the Serviatrix. I just do not know if I can bring myself to leave my daughter for so long again. Her life is finite and mine is infinite. Our time together is so precious.” “It is the same with mortals,” SoarOn explained as if he had to. “They have limited time to spend with one another and yet they part ways.” “Let me think about it,” Fairah spoke. “Ask me again before ye go?” “I shall,” SoarOn replied.

\* \* \*

Kabal, GuideMa, and Pluck tracked down Tad and found him in one of the gardens around the citadel. “Have ye come to have that talk I wanted?” Tad inquired. “We have,” GuideMa replied. “You wished to speak to Pluck as the False One?” “I do,” Tad answered. “Of what I understand, the Shadow and the Cursed have prophecies pertaining to the False One.” “It is what Malus told us,” GuideMa stated. “The Shadow even had us listen to one of their prophecies. It is the one Pluck spoke of while we were in the throne room.” Tad peered at the Femor, and then he said, “Ye do speak for the False One quite a lot. Does she have no voice?” “I have a voice,” Pluck replied. Tad ignored Pluck and spoke to the Femor, “Ye also seem to be where she is at all times. Why are ye constantly by her side?” Pluck spoke up before GuideMa could, “She is very loyal to Duke Gamemnon and he, like you, does not trust the False One so I need constant watching.” “The Femor is not one who follows ye?” Tad inquired. “No,” Pluck answered. “She owes Duke Gamemnon a great debt of gratitude so she has taken on the tedious job of following me. Where I go she goes?” Tad inquired, “What of the Duchess? She is not attached to ye as much as the Fe—” “I am not attached to the Woman,” GuideMa grumbled. “Woman..?” Tad stated. “I thought I heard that she was not a Necrom but of Man.” He finally turned his attention to Pluck and said, “So ye are a woman... a woman cursed to wear the flesh of those who despise her.” Pluck had forgotten... or more like put from her mind just how much the Necroms hated Man. She thought of Votar and the future she denied herself. Could they have even been happy if she had married him? What would have happened if she permanently reverted to her birth-form? Kabal nudged GuideMa as if she shouldn’t have said anything. Pluck noticed this and also realized that the Immortal Toadian was waiting for an answer from her. “I am a woman,” Pluck replied. “I am no longer hiding the fact.” “No longer?” “I did hide the fact when I first came to Wellspring but only so to save my people,” Pluck stated. “Only to save ye’s people? Did ye also not hide the fact to save ye’s self?” Tad questioned. “I heard—” Pluck glanced at Kabal, who, for



the most part, had been there during her time in Shangra when she pretended to be a Necrom. Pluck wanted to say she only lied or only kept the truth from everyone to save Edward and everyone else, but she was afraid for her own life. She decided not to answer his question. "You are asking me questions that you already have answers to," Pluck spoke. "Why not ask me questions that you don't already have the answers to?" Tad peered at her for a longer period of time, and then he said, "I can do that, False One." He paused to see how she would react to him using the despised name, and the Woman didn't seem bothered by it as if she had accepted her role as the False One. He stated, "As I was saying, the Duchess is not attached to ye as much as the Femor, but she does seem to be by ye's side quite a bit. Is she one who follows ye?" Pluck kept her gaze on the Immortal Toadian. She wasn't sure if it was because she didn't want to see the reaction in the Duchess' expression or what it was that she truly feared. Pluck replied, "There were a few who hoped I was the Serviatrix and they did follow me, but Votar's sister is not one of them." Tad purposely didn't address the Duchess with his next question as he inquired, "Does she also follow Tabitha and is loyally bound to Gamemnon in some—" "I definitely do not follow that male-snatching female!" Kabal snapped. "Who do ye follow?" Tad Inquired. "I follow... I will follow the true Serviatrix," Kabal declared. Tad questioned, "Who is the true Serviatrix?" Kabal thought about it and answered, "The one who will save Wellspring." "Are ye saying ye are undecided or that ye have already chosen and have decided not to reveal it to her?" Tad inquired. Kabal remained silent. Pluck felt how uncomfortable all of the Immortal Toadian's questions had been and wanted to move things along for all of their sakes, so she said, "Do you have any more questions for the False One? My time... is no longer my own, so I must hurry and do all that I need to do before I must go." "Go..?" Tad spoke. "Where are ye going?" "I'm not sure, but I do know that I will not be allowed to stay here much longer," Pluck replied. "Do you have any more questions?" "Not at this time," Tad answered. "This may be the only opportunity you will have to ask me. Are you sure you have no more questions?" "I am sure." Pluck nodded and headed out, and the two with her followed her. "Kabal and GuideMa... I do have more questions for ye," Tad called out and when Pluck turned, he added, "The False One should leave. She does not need to hear." She could think of nothing to say, so Pluck continued on and left while Kabal and GuideMa stayed. Pluck walked for about a mite and then stopped and glanced back the way she had come. Most likely Tad was still talking about her and with the two people who... She still wasn't sure how Kabal and GuideMa saw her. Pluck thought they hated her, but they have been helping her. She also knew just because someone helps you... Pluck turned and continued in the direction she was going. They might be helping her for their own reasons and those reasons were most likely because they were not helping her. Pluck walked for another three mites and stopped again. She had no idea where she was going. She still needed to see Zenba and Zung and give them a proper goodbye along with Quip and Staunch. She closed her eyes and envisioned Zenba scolding her for what she did, and the thought made her smile but also brought a tear to her eye. Pluck didn't know if she had the energy to say her goodbyes just yet. She couldn't even say goodbye to Votar. Pluck realized how tired she was and decided to head to her room to lie down. Rest would be good... if her worrisome mind would allow her rest. Pluck looked around the area she was in and realized she had no clue where she was and sighed. It would take her some time to find someone for directions, and all she wanted to do was lay her head on her pillow and shut her eyes. Pluck started again in the direction she had been going as her weary body nagged at her to stop and curl up in a corner. She pushed forward, promising to

obey but only when she was in her own room. She spotted a monk some distance from her and lifted her hand to call to him when someone very powerful grabbed her and dragged her into a room. Everything was a blur until she was slammed up against a wall. The Dreadgon, who had come with Sabrina, had her pinned. Sabrina's other companions were also there. Pluck tried to free herself but his massive hand had ahold of her left arm, covering up the Lux, and his other hand was poised to deliver a punch that would most likely decimate her. "Not so high and mighty now that you can't draw your sword, are you, one of privilege?" Sabrina questioned. Pluck stopped her struggling. She was too exhausted to do anything even if she managed to free herself. "What do you want?" "I notice you were talking to my Immortal," Sabrina stated and then asked, "Are you trying to steal him away to your side, False One?" "Is the loyalty Tad has for you so flimsy that you would question it?" Pluck inquired and then tested those there by asking, "What about your companions? Would you question their loyalty if they had spoken alone with me?" "I would not," Sabrina replied. "We are family and the Toadian is not." "I will then tell you that Tad only questioned me as the False One," Pluck stated, noticed the Dreadgon hadn't lessened his hold on her, and said, "You didn't drag me in here by force just to hear the answer to your question." "I did not," Sabrina replied. "I mean to eliminate the opposition." "Am I the first or have you hurt Tabitha?" Pluck questioned. "Are you worried about your mistress?" Sabrina asked. "I heard that you're her servitor. You're a False One and a slave to another false Serviatrix. What would you do if I told you I had already killed her?" "I would say that I was wrong," Pluck replied. "Wrong about what?" Sabrina asked. "I would be wrong about myself for if you killed Tabitha, you are the False One." Sabrina considered her answer, and then she said, "The prophecy the Duke of Torlawn spouted said, 'For one Serviatrix to rise, two must fall and with the fall comes victory.' I mean to rise. I have already claimed the throne now all I need to do is—" "It was also a Shadow Prophecy," Pluck informed her and questioned, "Why would they want one of the Serviatrixes to kill off the other two?" "Do you have an answer?" "Maybe the one who kills them off is the False One and one of the two that she kills is the true Serviatrix," Pluck replied. "The False One would then be nothing but an agent of the Shadow and the Cursed, and Wellspring would not be saved but fall under darkness. Is that what you want?" "I do have my own agenda for being the Serviatrix," Sabrina spoke. "Saving Wellspring is not my objective, but I also do not want to see it fall under darkness. My objective would not be possible then." "You are like Duke Gamemnon," Pluck accused her. "You have some sort of other agenda for involving yourself in the Serviatrix other than saving Wellspring." Sabrina didn't know the Duke of Torlawn all that well, but she could hear in the False One's voice that she had insulted her. Sabrina said, "I should slap you for what you said, but I am in a very good mood today." Pluck asked, "Did you hurt Tabitha?" "I would think you would thank me, servitor. With your mistress dead, you would be free." "Did you hurt Tabitha?" Pluck repeated, keeping her anger in check. Sabrina considered her answer and then replied, "The other false Serviatrix is not dead yet." Pluck relaxed and again her weariness took over. She just stood there waiting for whatever reason they dragged her into the room. Sabrina peered at her as if she was waiting for her to make the first move and her companions also seemed to be waiting. Pluck really wanted to return to her room so she decided to push things along and the only thing she could think of to ask was, "Why are you in a good mood today?" "A good mood..?" Sabrina repeated as if she hadn't said it. "You said you were in a good mood," Pluck spoke, turned to the Dreadgon, and asked, "Didn't she?" "She did," he replied. "I don't know if I should tell you, one of privilege," Sabrina spoke. "I

have found out that I pass some more of the prophecies concerning the Serviatrix.” “Why would that make you happy?” Pluck questioned. “Happy... not so much, but it does place me in a good mood because now I can further my plans.” Pluck glanced around at her companions and noticed they were all nodding their heads as if they were all in agreement with whatever Sabrina had planned. She turned her attention back to Sabrina and said, “The tattoo with the rose... It has some sort of meaning, yes?” “It is the mark of my clan...” Sabrina answered, spread her arms as if embracing all those there, and added, “... of all our clan.” “They are your family,” Pluck said. “You seem to protect your family. Will you even protect your family from the Shadow and the Cursed?” “I will protect my family from any danger,” Sabrina declared. “Your agenda... Is it something to protect your family or does it have some other purpose?” “Why should I tell you anything about my agenda?” Pluck asked, “Should I not know because I am the False One or should I not know because I am not of your family?” Sabrina considered her question, and then she answered, “I will tell you if you will show me your scarred rose, oh, one of privilege.” “Why do you keep calling me one of privilege?” Pluck questioned. “I am a servier after all.” “Isn’t that what you are? I have seen the way the others treat you. You are a highborn.” Pluck started to deny she was a highborn but realized she was a daughter of a king, so instead, she said, “I was not raised as a highborn. I was actually a High Guard protecting the Prince of my land.” “A Warrior of High...” the Dreadgon muttered. Sabrina heard him and ignored him and said, “No matter what you claim. I still see how others treat you.” Sabrina paused, and then she questioned, “What of my offer? Show me your scarred rose and I will tell you my agenda.” Pluck spoke, believing Sabrina would not agree to it, “Tell me of your agenda and then I will show you my scarred rose.” “Agreed,” Sabrina spoke, and then she began, “My agenda—” “Wait!” Pluck interrupted her. “What is it?” “I don’t think I want to show you my scarred rose,” Pluck admitted. “If that is true, you should have just let me tell you of my agenda and then refused to show me.” Pluck told her, “If I did that, I would be betraying who I am.” Sabrina laughed and then said, “The False One claims to be someone of principles.” “It’s just... I have betrayed myself and I don’t want to do so again.” “Principles I can except,” Sabrina stated. “But it does look like you have nothing to trade. I could add to the deal that I will not kill Tabitha for as long as she is within the citadel.” Pluck didn’t like that deal any better, and she shook her head. Sabrina could still kill Tabitha at a later time. “I might as well leave and let my family deal with you as they see fit,” Sabrina spoke and started to leave. “Wait...” Pluck yelled, not really hearing the threat to her own life in her statement. She questioned, “How valuable would you say the information you are going to give me about your agenda is?” “Very,” Sabrina replied. “I would like to amend your offer. You will not kill Tabitha or any who do not follow you until you have bested me in a duel.” “A duel without your sword?” “We can both be unarmed,” Pluck answered. Sabrina nodded. Pluck said, “I can agree to show you but only you.” “And once I agree, you will unsheathe that terrifying sword again and kill me.” “No... I am very shy and I must undress to show you,” Pluck explained. “I will allow the Dreadgon to hold my sword.” Sabrina considered it and then said, “Search her. Does she have any other weapons on her.” The Dreadgon searched her and found none. “My agenda is simple,” Sabrina began. “I mean to topple the Necrom Kingdom and bring an age of equality to all. I mean to wipe out the ruling class.” Sabrina ordered her, “Give him your sword.” The Dreadgon released her, and Pluck pulled off her gauntlet, handed the Lux to him, and said, “I will allow you to hold him for me. Take care of my sword.” The Dreadgon nodded and took the Lux, and then all of Sabrina’s companions left the room. “Show me, highborn. Show me your

scarred rose," Sabrina commanded her. "Would you mind turning around?" Pluck asked as she took her pointer and made the swirling motion. "So you can stab... so you can attack me from behind?" "Yes," Pluck answered. "And so I can undress." "I will close my eyes, but do not move or I will attack you," Sabrina threatened her. Pluck nodded, and Sabrina closed her eyes. Pluck turned so that her back faced the female Necrom, then she removed her shirt, balled it and placed it in front of herself to cover herself. "I am ready," Pluck stated. Sabrina opened her eyes, saw the giant rose on her back, and all the scars that covered it. Sabrina's face that had been all cocky turned to one of anger and disgust. She turned her back to the Woman and said, "Dress. I will call my companions back shortly." Pluck placed her shirt back on as Sabrina called her companions in. The Femor questioned, "Does she possess a scarred rose?" "She does," Sabrina replied. The Dreadgon handed Pluck back her gauntlet as he said to Sabrina, "Tell us about it." "I will at another time," Sabrina told him. "What now?" Pluck questioned as she placed the Lux back on her arm. "Now..." Sabrina began as she looked at the faces of her companions. "Now... we part ways." She turned and headed out as her companions seemed surprised and then followed. The Femor hurried and caught up to her and questioned her, "Why didn't you tell us more about her scarred rose?" "Her back..." Sabrina began. "Her back is just like father's." The Femor paused and glanced at the Woman, and then the Femor once again caught up to Sabrina. "Does this change things?" the Femor questioned. "Yes, I need to know more about the False One. Talk to the Toadian and tell him of my wishes and also tell him I would like to leave tomorrow once I eat and sleep through the night." The Femor nodded and went off to do her bidding. The Dreadgon came up beside Sabrina as they all walked. "I overheard," he said. "You do have very large ear holes." "Why are you so upset by this fact?" the Dreadgon questioned her. "If she is a highborn as I believe, why does she also bare the same shame as father? I don't like it when I am in the dark on something I actually want to know." "I will ask again," the Dreadgon spoke. "Does it really matter that this False One was whipped?" "Maybe I am too sensitive to what happened to father," Sabrina spoke. "I care not that the False One was injured. I only care..." "Care..." he urged her to finish. "I only care about those who are my family. The False One and the other false Serviatrix are not my family. Tabitha is definitely high-born and Pluck... She stinks of royal blood and yet... she claims to not have lived by its privilege. It does not matter. Pluck is still one of privilege and all highborns must die."

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Rest... A Distant Memory**

Pluck stood in the room Sabrina had left her in and wearily stared at the exit. She still had to find her room before her tired eyes could close for longer than a blink. She started to head out when a jade-green light lit up the area just outside and then a streak of jade flashed before her. Zenba had plastered herself to Pluck's face and was hugging her. Pluck smiled and though exhausted, she would take her time and greet her friend properly. She reached up her hand and gently hugged Zenba back. Zung, her brother, was also there. Zenba started to cry as she said, "You have been a wretched friend." "I know." "You are such a wretched friend." "I know," Pluck repeated

as she felt her friend's love through her scolding. "You should not have lied to us... to me about what you were doing when you left us in the Valley of Blood." "I am sorry," Pluck spoke with her feelings, knowing the pain she had caused her friend. "Don't ever do that to me again," Zenba told her. "I don't know if I can promise you that." Zenba whispered, "You will promise me you will never lie to me again." "I don't know if I can—" Zenba pulled away from her and fluttered in front of her as she finally snapped and yelled, "You will promise me this or we can't be friends anymore!" Pluck peered at her with her emerald-green eyes, and then Pluck started to cry. She didn't mean to in front of her friend but Pluck was just so exhausted and the tears came. The KellyZing's heart immediately melted for her friend and her anger and outrage fled. "Don't cry... Please don't cry. I didn't mean to yell at you," Zenba said. "It is just that I was so upset when I heard what you had done. I was so upset when you didn't tell me what you were planning on doing." Pluck laughed as she tried to stop her weeping. "I am not crying because you are yelling at me and because you are upset with me. You have a right to your anger. I am crying because... I am crying because we are friends. You have been such a good friend to me. Not only did you and your brother save me by demanding the Mud People not kill me and take me back to their village... but you saved my soul from shattering when you stood by me through everything I have gone through since our meeting. I am such a wicked friend... and I am sorry for not telling you what my plans were but my tears... these tears you see are of joy. You might have been shouting at me but your words have brought warmth back to my heart. I feel so lost and confused." Zung turned and flew out to give the friends some time to speak alone. Zenba said, "Now you are going to make me cry." Pluck told her, "Votar has declared his love for me and his desire to marry me." "I heard that you agreed to be the Duchess of Shangra but only so that he would let you part from him and so that you could hand yourself over to the Shadow." "Thanks to his sister, I was able to leave him and I didn't need to lie to him but..." Pluck spoke, paused, and said, "The Shadow are not the only reason I lied to Votar about marrying him. Something within me is afraid. I want to let go of my fear and love him with everything that is within me... but I am still afraid that he will betray me. I am so afraid that he will betray my affections." "There is always a risk when you open your heart up to someone else," Zenba told her. "I do know that Votar loves you." "Is love enough?" Pluck asked. "His people hate my people and he has accepted me but only because he sees me as a female Necrom. What happens if I turn into a woman and remain in that form?" "What do you mean?" Zenba questioned. "GuideMa said that after Malus kissed me—" "The Shadow Necrom kissed you!" Zenba uttered after she gasped. She placed two of her translucent jade hands to her mouth in shock, and then she asked, "Did you kiss him back? Do you have feelings for this Malus? Are you two in some twisted relationship that Votar does not know about?" "I..." Pluck began as she felt her face flush. Her friend had exploded at her with so many implicit questions it was like being attacked by a green glittery ball of magic that flashed right before her eyes and blinded her for a few moments. Pluck was a little disoriented and overwhelmed by what they implied, but she gathered her thoughts as best as she could after the unintended assault and said, "I think I need to start over. I didn't explain it very well." She put a hand to her chin as she thought and questioned herself, "What way to best describe it?" Pluck believed she had a clear direction to go in and started with, "I had fainted because the choker I wear cut off most of my air. Malus brought me back by pressing his lips to mine and—" "There is magic in his lips?" Zenba asked in a high-pitch voice Pluck had never heard come from her before. Zenba asked, "Did he place another curse on you besides the one that binds your life to him? Do



you believe you are in love with him? Has he claimed more than your life?" Pluck was confused by why her friend was even asking her such things, and she blinked a couple of times as she considered how her friend came about her way of thinking... her very wrong way of thinking. "Maybe if I leave his lips out of this—" "How can you?" Zenba questioned. "They are so important to the tale you are describing. Please... tell me all that happened." "I am trying to but you keep—" "I keep doing what?" "You keep interrupting me with questions and ideas that should not be part of the retelling," Pluck tried to explain. "It's hard enough talking about it but to have to retell it is becoming very painful. Remember... I am trying to explain something about Votar, not the one who owns my life." "I'm sorry," Zenba told her as she realized she might have leapt to the wrong conclusion. "Please continue, and I will try not to interrupt again." Pluck nodded, and then she said, "After I stopped breathing, Malus placed his mouth over mine. It is the way GuideMa later explained it to me... Malus wasn't kissing me but more like placing air back into my lungs. He did so to encourage my lungs to breathe on their own again. It was not really a kiss." "Are you sure?" Zenba questioned, and then she pointed out, "Your face does seem all flustered." "It is very embarrassing to talk about it," Pluck replied. "Especially because I had to repeat myself several times." "My fault... I know. Please, go on..." Zenba urged her. "Tell me what you were going to tell me from the start." Pluck started with, "GuideMa said that Malus kiss... that Malus pressed his lips over mine and my appearance transformed into a woman. This was the point I was trying to get to, not anything else that you were implying. You see... I'm afraid," she admitted to her friend, and then Pluck asked, hoping for some reassuring words, "What if Votar kisses me and the same thing happens and he completely rejects me?" Zenba now understood her friend's pain and anxiety and how much she must love Votar. She told her, "You should tell him of your fears and that you could possibly transform back into your original form and remain." "Even if I tell him and he accepts this, it is nothing compared to it actually happening," Pluck spoke, revealing more of her apprehensions. "I am so afraid of him rejecting me. I am so afraid of losing him. I couldn't stand him rejecting me again." "And here I was a little afraid that you might have fallen for that very handsome and yet dangerous Shadow Necrom, but now I know your heart belongs to Votar," Zenba spoke. "I think it would be better if my heart belonged to no one," she stated, and then Pluck said so not to linger on things that were worrisome, "Come... I would like to spend some time with you, my friend. I hear the monks of this citadel keep many different kinds of gardens. Would you walk with me and try to make me laugh? You always seem to bring a smile to my face." "I will try," Zenba told her as she flew beside her and the sound of tiny bells trailed behind them. "I make no guarantees other than I will walk with you as your friend."

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Earlier...

The Immortal Toadian waited until the Woman had been gone over a mite before he addressed the questions he wanted to ask the Duchess of Shangra and the female Femor. "The two of ye claim to have no allegiance to the False One and yet I have observed both of ye at her side quite a bit. Ye, GuideMa, claim ye are watching over the False One as ye's duke had instructed ye, and ye, Duchess Kabal, claim... What was it that ye claim?" Kabal replied immediately, "I am also keeping a watch on the Woman as she is one who wants to sink her claws into my brother." Tad

considered her answer, and then he stated, "I say ye are both liars. It might be true that Duke Gamemnon ordered ye to follow the Woman, but ye, GuideMa, have been assisting her as if ye are—" "Don't you dare say the word," GuideMa warned him. "Which word might that be?" Tad asked. "The word 'helping' or the word 'friend'?" "Any word that might shine a kind light on the type of relationship I have with the Woman," GuideMa answered. "Ye used the word relationship," Tad said. "Ye must believe ye have some sort of connection with the False One." "I didn't use relationship," GuideMa insisted Kabal spoke up, "You did. I also heard you use the word." GuideMa turned and glared at the Duchess with her insect-like eyes, and then she said, "You are not helping." GuideMa turned to the Immortal Toadian and spoke, "It does not matter if I used the word 'relationship'. I have been doing as I said I had been doing and nothing more. I watch what the False One does and I report back to Gamemnon." Tad realized something and said, "Ye are one who watches the False One. Ye are a... Ye are the Watcher." GuideMa didn't like that the Immortal Toadian may have figured out her role, and she liked it even less as she remembered how hard Pluck had worked to make sure no one, beyond the Shadow, had found out. "Ye have not denied it," Tad stated. "I remember some of the prophecies I came across long ago that mentioned a Watcher. If ye are the Watcher, should ye not be watching Tabitha? She is Duke Gamemnon's choice for the Serviatrix." Kabal glanced at the Femor as she realized she may have learned something more about GuideMa, and then Kabal spoke to distract the Immortal Toadian, "I am growing impatient and wish to no longer be here. Ask me your questions and allow me to leave." GuideMa wasn't sure if the Duchess had just helped her or was only being her usual selfish self. Either way, she was grateful for the distraction it brought. "Does a mere Duchess tell an Immortal what he or she should do?" Tad inquired. "I am not sure what importance you believe you and your kind have," Kabal began. "But I have only come across JuJu and he is not that impressive. He's smelly and has the worse social manners I have ever seen, but beyond that, not that impressive. If you Immortals want more reverence and respect, the lot of you should not have hidden yourselves away." Tad got all huffed over what she had said and insisted, "I never hid away. I have been traveling all over Wellspring since the time ye Necroms drove Man away. I have been busying myself preparing for Man's return and preparing for the Serviatrix." Kabal laughed at him and said, "Preparing for the Serviatrix? You have had all of this time and the best you could come up with is the rude and obnoxious Sabrina?" "What is wrong with Sabrina?" Tad questioned. "Do I really need to explain it?" Kabal asked. "I guess not," Tad replied as he thought about it. "She is rough around the edges—" "Rough around the edges," Kabal interrupted. "Alba is rough around the edges..." "Alba..?" Tad muttered to himself as the Duchess continued speaking. Kabal continued, "...but her mind and heart is focused on saving Wellspring. I have no idea what type of schemes your Sabrina has for claiming to be the Serviatrix but claims are all they are. Sabrina is no Serviatrix." Tad laughed and then asked, "Are ye saying the False One... this Woman that has so many who despise her is, in fact, the true Serviatrix?" "I am saying," Kabal began, glanced at the Femor, turned back to the Immortal Toadian, and spoke, "I am only saying that Sabrina is not the Serviatrix." "What about Tabitha?" Tad questioned the Duchess, and then he addressed both Kabal and GuideMa, "Do ye both believe that Tabitha is the true Serviatrix?" Kabal again glanced at the Femor and said, "I can only speak for myself, but I don't believe Tabitha is the true Serviatrix but she is more of a candidate than Sabrina." "What of ye who is the Watcher? Is Tabitha the true Serviatrix?" Tad asked. GuideMa peered at him for a long time, and then she said, "I tire of your questions. Return to the one you follow." Tad

glanced at both females, and then he said, "I have enough answers for now. I better go check on the one I follow to make sure she has not gotten herself into any mischief." The Immortal Toadian left. GuideMa moved over to the Duchess and questioned her, "Why do you call the Woman, Alba, when you come to her defense or speak of her as if you two are friends? I know that her birth name is Alba but it was taken away and returned to her as a servir." "I cannot say," Kabal answered as she didn't want to know herself. It would be better not to even consider that she might consider the vile Woman... consider Pluck a friend or care what happens to her. "I think I can say for you," GuideMa spoke. "Even for a selfish Duchess, your heart is able to overrule your mind now and again. Alba is your endearing name for the Woman." Kabal started to deny it and scold the Femor, but then she decided to stop fighting against her own feelings. She was tired of lying to herself. She would just focus on lying to other people. "I thought you would have denied it," GuideMa said a little surprised. "Are you only weary from our conversation with the Immortal Toadian or am I right?" "I am weary of this conversation," Kabal replied. "I think I will return to my room." The Duchess started for the door when the Femor moved and blocked her way and said, "I wish to finish our conversation." "And after you sent the Immortal Toadian away... I thought you were done talking," Kabal said. "I wish to be done talking so let us finish it now," GuideMa demanded more than she suggested. "Fine," Kabal replied in a huff. "What do you wish to know?" "If Pluck was not a Woman... If Pluck was actually a Necrom, would your opinion of her be any different?" "I don't know," Kabal answered. "I believed Pluck was a Necrom when I first met her and I despised her then." "Why?" "Because I believed her intentions were aimed at the position of wife and Duchess of Shangra," Kabal replied. "So you have always disliked her," GuideMa stated. "It is the same with me." "It is a half-truth," Kabal admitted. "I was also fascinated with her when we first met. She, a female, claimed to be a High Guard... a warrior... and I have known no female Necrom that was a warrior." Kabal grinned, "She was also so shy and unlearned in many ways. I found that endearing." "You are smiling," GuideMa told her. "I believe you have always wanted to be friends with her. I believe you are a friend to her now." "Do not say such things. Even if they are true," Kabal scolded her. "I have done so many terrible things to Pluck. I don't deserve to be called her friend." "And what if I keep insisting that you are her friend?" GuideMa questioned her. "Then I will have to insist that you are one also," Kabal informed her. "Threat well taken," GuideMa said. Kabal started out of the door, but then paused, and asked, "How did Pluck receive Alba as her servir name?" "I suggested it to Tabitha as she searched for a name to call the Woman," GuideMa replied. "Why did you suggest Alba?" "I suggested it because you had said it wasn't a name but more of a curse." "You are saying it is my fault that Pluck received her old name back." Kabal laughed. "I actually gave her a blessing in a way." Kabal went out the door and said no more. GuideMa soon followed and went her own way.

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Zenba and Pluck moved among the flower gardens surrounding the citadel as Roth Monks busied themselves with work. Zenba rode on her friend's shoulder as they talked and laughed together. Pluck cherished this time with her for she feared it would be the last sun's cycle she would see everyone she cared about. A few nals went by, and Pluck started to walk back to her room for some much-needed rest when the Gold Choker of Fettering slightly squeezed her neck. The choker was uncomfortable but didn't hurt her. She glanced all around but didn't see the

Shadow Necrom but knew he was close. "Zenba, I need for you to return to the citadel," Pluck told her friend. "Are you tired? I have kept you from resting even though you look tired," Zenba questioned as she flew and hovered in front of her friend's face. The KellyZing noticed an expression of sadness Pluck was trying to hide, and Zenba asked, "Is it already time for us to part ways?" "I believe so," Pluck answered. "If I am unable to tell the others goodbye, please tell them for me." "I will," Zenba spoke as she tried not to cry for she knew if she did, Pluck would also cry. "You have been a true friend to me," Pluck told her with great affection. "I will always be a true friend to you even when distance comes between us. Even if death—" "Don't say it or I will not be able to hold back these tears that are already pounding on my eyes to be released," Zenba told her. "Hug me one more time," Pluck requested. Zenba went over to her and embraced her furry cheek with all four of her arms. Pluck reached up and nearly encompassed all of the KellyZing's body with her hand and she fearfully, desperately, and gently held onto her. Pluck closed her eyes, embracing the love of another. They stood there in their sisterly hug until the choker warned Pluck she needed to hurry. "You must go now," she told the KellyZing. "And please share my love with all who I hold dear." Zenba nodded and then flew off, and her jade glow slowly faded into the distance. Pluck went and found a secluded area within the gardens, and Malus came to her. She said nothing to him only waited to see what he would do or say. "I have come for what is mine," he said. She took a step toward him, trying not to cry from the deep hollowness of leaving her friends, Votar, and her mother was causing her. "You are very silent when not that long ago you were talking and laughing with the KellyZing," Malus spoke. "What would I have to talk about or laugh about with one of the Shadow?" Pluck asked him. Malus didn't like what she had said as if he wasn't part of something that belonged in her life, and he owned her life. He said, "I have observed you with this KellyZing. Does she also own some part of you?" "She does and know... if you also try to hurt her as you tried to hurt Votar, I will kill you before you can take the life you own." He said nothing concerning her threat but felt something unsettling within himself. Malus owned her life which should be very valuable, but he seemed to own something that had no value at all to him. He wanted the precious things he saw others around Pluck possess. Malus just didn't know how to take it... how to claim it as his own. Malus had become silent before her. He peered at her with his intense dark blue eyes as if he desired something of her. Pluck was tired... She was exhausted... And she couldn't believe how hard it was to leave everyone behind. It had been so easy compared to this to leave her friends... her mother... even Votar... when she thought she was handing her life over to die. Pluck would have to live on, however long the Shadow decided to let her live, without those who were so dear to her. She wanted to cry, she wanted to sleep, she wanted to scream, but all she did was stand there. "Did you sit upon the throne within this citadel when the dancing lights of green and blue began and became as Man's blood?" Malus questioned. "No, another sat upon the throne within this citadel," Pluck replied. "No matter... You are the False One and we will use you to further our goals." The flying beast that had brought him there stepped from the shadows, and Malus mounted the beast. He stretched forth his hand for her to take it as he ordered, "Come, it is time to return to the others." She turned her head from him and looked at the structure of the citadel, envisioning the faces of all she held dear. Pluck would never see any of them again. "Take my hand," he commanded. She turned at his command and something deep within himself... something he had been taught to hide in the unseen crevasses of his being felt a pang of... Malus wasn't sure what this pain was or why what he witnessed made him feel so. He

questioned her as if what she was doing was alien to him, "What are you doing?" "I am doing nothing," she replied. "I am only standing here." "No, you are doing something." Pluck had no idea what he was talking about. She was only standing there and insisted, "I am doing nothing. I am very tired." She held up her hand to him and said, "Let us leave. I need to rest, and I might be able to on your beast." Malus didn't take her hand and continued to peer down at her, and the pain in his chest became greater. He accused her, "You are crying." "I am. What does it matter?" "It is as it was before," he began. "In the Valley of Blood when we met for the first time and you killed me... You are wounding me again." "They are only tears," Pluck told him. "They have no magic behind them... They have no power behind them... They are only tears." "Cease your crying," he ordered her. "You must have seen others cry before," Pluck spoke. "You are of the Shadow. You must have made countless beings cry." "I have," he admitted. "I can't tell you how many I have made cry and scream but to see you cry somehow wounds me." "I doubt that," Pluck stated as she shook her own hand so he would take it. "I am tired. Let us go if we are to go." "I don't think I can. You must cease your crying first." "I can't. You are taking me away from everyone I love. I am supposed to weep and lament my fate." He drew the Constraining Dagger and commanded, "Cease your crying." Pluck grabbed at the Gold Choker of Fettering as she felt its power, and it drained some of her life force. "Cease your crying!" Malus commanded again. "You can't control my heart and it's weeping!" Pluck screamed at him. "All you can do is end my life!" He released the hold the choker had on her, and she could breathe normally again. "I want your heart," he told her. "You want my heart?" Pluck questioned him. "You already have my heart. Don't you understand? You are holding my heart in your hand and all you can do with it is shred it to pieces. You think you are in pain... I'm in agony." "I don't have your heart," he insisted. "I don't have your heart as the others have your heart." Pluck told him, "You will never have my heart in that way. You would have to give me your heart first and you have no heart." "I do have a heart. I feel it racing in my chest. It is pounding so hard. I believe it is the cause of the pain I am experiencing." "You lie," Pluck said. "You have no heart. None of the Shadow have any hearts. You hurt people... You kill people... You even eat people as if they are animals. To do all that to people, you can't have a heart. A heart would prevent you from doing..." Pluck paused from her screaming. She was so tired she couldn't stand anymore, so she turned and went and sat on a bench before she collapsed. She said no more to him and for some reason that worried Malus, so he slid down from his beast and went to her side. "Tell me more how I have your heart and yet I don't have your heart," he requested. "You have imprisoned my heart," Pluck started to explain. "You are keeping it from the ones I love." "Love... It means of importance." "It means more than that," she explained, not understanding the Shadow's meaning of importance. "Love is when you care for someone more than yourself." "What you speak is a taboo," Malus spoke angrily. "We are always to put ourselves first. We are always to put our own desires first." "And that is the reason you will have no one's heart. You will only be able to imprison their heart." Pluck lifted her hand and shook it angrily at him as she demanded, "Take me back now. I am very tired. Take me back or allow me to return to my room to rest." "I must think about this heart complexity you have given me. I will understand this puzzle first before I take you back to the Shadow, and I also do not see the Witness. I can't take the False One without the Witness." Malus mounted his beast once again and commanded it, and it took to the air. He flew away leaving Pluck standing there stunned and bewildered. She slowly turned and headed toward her room. She nearly was to her room when she heard the voice of Votar,



"Pluck! Pluck!" She paused and faced him and saw that many of his guards were with him. "Where is the Shadow Necrom? GuideMa said he had come for you." "He is gone," she answered. "It was not time for me to leave." "I can't do it," Votar spoke to her in anger but not in anger. "Do what?" "I can't keep my promise to you," he spoke as his heart made him crazed with hatred and desperation. "I am going to track down and kill the Shadow Necrom!" "I must sit," Pluck said, turned, entered her room, and headed for her bed. GuideMa was within sitting by an unlit fireplace and was reading a book she had borrowed from the library, and she questioned, "Why are you bringing all of these male Necroms into our room?" "I have brought no one into our room," Pluck told her. "They have followed me." GuideMa stood and turned to the Duke and said, "Leave our room. You should not be in here." Pluck was so tired she went into the next room and laid on top of her bed flat on her back. Votar moved beside her bed and stated, "You said nothing when I told you I would kill the Shadow Necrom." GuideMa glanced at the Shangra Guards and then shooed them out into the hallway. She re-entered their room and went and sat on her bed that was next to the Woman's. She watched as the Duke continued to talk to the Woman. Votar repeated when Pluck never answer him, "You said nothing when I told you I would kill the Shadow Necrom." "I am very tired," Pluck told him as she closed her eyes. "I must sleep." "We must talk about the Shadow Necrom," Votar insisted. GuideMa folded two of her arms and stated, irked she had finally found some peace and quiet only to be disturbed again, "I told you about the Woman not so that you could come in my room and disturb my relaxation. Leave... Take all of your guards and leave." "Pluck," Votar began as he wanted her to speak to him. "I just told you I must break my promise." "Are you wanting permission from me to break your promise?" she questioned him. Closing her eyes was not enough to make him leave, so she rolled on her side and faced the Femor and away from him as she said, "Do what you must. I have to sleep. I am so tired that I'm afraid I may never sleep." He didn't like that she was ignoring him. Votar didn't like that she wouldn't look at him, so he sat down beside her on the bed. GuideMa glared at the Duke of Shangra as he had a deaf ear to both herself and the Woman. She thought about yelling at him for disturbing her reading, especially after she had told him of the Woman's near abduction... not abduction, but that she would have been taken forever. GuideMa purposely kept her gaze from the Woman's face. She had watched Pluck enough and needed a break herself from her imposed job both from her Duke and the Shadow. The Femor couldn't resist and turned to Pluck. The Woman was exhausted as she said but she was also something else. GuideMa hated her duty. She was starting to understand how the Woman felt. The bed shifted as Votar sat next to her. Pluck was very very tired but her weariness also kept her tears away. Once Malus had left her and Pluck walked all the way back to her room after getting lost twice, she had become too tired to cry out her sorrow or scream out her frustrations. She thought she could keep her emotions in check and just go to sleep that was until Votar sat right beside her. Pluck pulled her hands closer to herself and curled up in a fetal position. She hoped he would take the hint, but he was oblivious to her unspoken wishes. "I can't let you go," Votar told her. "I need you by my side. The Shadow Necrom spoke of wanting to possess your heart. Pluck... you have my heart. You have allowed me to love again. I thought I could never love again but then you appeared in my life like this fierce force that swept me into love again. I was first mesmerized by you and then I gradually came to know you. The sun's cycle I discovered you were a Woman... a member of the race I was taught to despise and hate... my whole world collapsed in on itself. I hated you... not the you I had grown to love, but I hated the part of you

that shattered any future we would have had together. I was wrong back then. My hatred was wrong for it stained the love I had for you. I know that now, and I won't let anything get in our way of being together. You have already told me you love me, so I won't let my promise or the curse you are bound by to the Shadow get in the way of us." She gripped her hands tightly together. Pluck wanted to sit up and embrace his vow and his love but that would only bring death to all who she loved. It would only bring death to Votar who she had given her whole heart to. "Tell me I can break my promise to you," Votar spoke. "Tell me you also desire to be with me, and I will kill the Shadow Necrom." Desire and wishes flooded her exhausted mind. Pluck couldn't see how to get herself out of her own pledge to the Shadow. She had exchanged her life for all she held dear. How could she go back on that pledge? She freely gave her life and it was bound by the choker and the dagger and Malus. Pluck was about to tell him to leave that her life belonged to another and that she couldn't share her life with him, but then he reached over and grabbed one of her hands and held onto it with unwavering affection. "I love you, Pluck. I love all that you are. Tell me I can break my promise to you," Votar spoke as he intertwined his fingers with her, strengthening the hold he had on her. "Tell me and with all the power that I have... I will make sure we are never parted again." Her weariness only strengthened her thoughts and wishes of a world where she and Votar would be happy, and she once again envisioned a life as Votar's wife. Pluck knew he loved her. She had felt his love. Pluck knew he would try to do as he had promised if she would allow him to break the oath he had given her. She was so tempted to give him permission to break his oath but the choker was still around her neck and she would also have to break her vow to the Shadow. Pluck was so tired. She didn't want to have to think about these things. She didn't want to have to decide anything. Pluck looked at the Femor, pleading for her help. She was afraid of many things. Pluck didn't have the energy to help herself. She wanted to give in and embrace Votar but that might lead to the one thing that might be their undoing... Even if Votar somehow freed her from Malus, her love for Votar might lead to the kiss she was now dreading. Why was she even thinking about their first kiss? Could it be Votar's touch? His touch was comforting and she believed if he would only sit next to her, she could sleep. No... He couldn't stay here. He had to leave, but she didn't have the will to tell him to leave. GuideMa sighed as Pluck pleaded with her with her eyes. She wasn't about to help the Woman, but she would help herself. GuideMa set her book down on her own bed and shoed the Duke out as she said, "Go on... Leave... Leave before I scream and bring all the monks in the area running." The Duke of Shangra remained even with her threat. He remained and still held onto Pluck's hand. GuideMa moved to him. He would be the final obstacle. If she could get him to leave, she could return to her reading. Votar wasn't about to let the Femor get in his way. He needed Pluck's permission, and he vowed to get it before he left. "Pluck... you must—" he began. "You must let her sleep," GuideMa interrupted as she folded all four of her arms this time. He ignored the Femor and focused on the one who still hadn't looked at him. Pluck also didn't hold his hand back. She just laid there with her back to him and her hand limp in his. "Pluck... you must—" "You are a very selfish duke," GuideMa spoke. "What do you mean?" Votar asked. "Can't you see how tired she is? I told you of the Shadow Necrom so that you could rescue her, not torment her in her exhausted state when all she needs is rest." GuideMa waved him away with one hand and demanded, "Leave and come back much later." He ignored her again, so she asked, "Do you really want her to relent to your demands just so that she can get rid of you and sleep? She might regret her answer." GuideMa waved him away with two hands

and ordered, "Come back... no better yet. Pluck will come to you once she has rested enough and eaten again." He started to argue but finally heard the wisdom in the Femor's words. Votar leaned over, lifted Pluck's hand to his lips, and kissed her on the hand. He squeezed her hand once more, stood, and left, shutting the door behind him. "Some males just do not know when to leave a female's bedchamber," GuideMa spoke to see if she would get a reaction from the Woman. Pluck said nothing but stared at the hand she had drawn back to herself, the hand Votar had kissed. "At least you didn't revert into a Woman when he kissed you." "It must be on the lips," Pluck stated. "The promise that was made before the Mystic Rose was that the kiss would be on the lips." GuideMa went back over to her bed, sat on the edge, and grabbed the book she had set down. She commanded the Woman, "Sleep now that I have gained you time to sleep. You look very exhausted." "I am," Pluck admitted. "And as I said before, I am so tired I don't know if I can sleep." She continued to stare at her hand as she spoke softly, "His touch was so comforting. If I wasn't so stressed over his demands, I think I could have slept." "You can't sleep if you don't close your eyes," GuideMa told her. Pluck did as she ordered but her mind was in so much turmoil, it wouldn't let her sleep or even rest. She opened her eyes, and GuideMa was once again reading to herself. "I can feel you looking at me," GuideMa said without taking her eyes off of the page she was reading. "And if you are looking at me, you aren't sleeping." Pluck closed her eyes again but even with them shut, she could see the faces of all those she would be leaving behind. She rolled on her back and stared up at the ceiling. "I can sense that your eyes are open again." "I'm not looking at you," Pluck told the Femor. "No, but your eyes are open. Close them... Sleep..." "I can't," Pluck admitted. "I'm too worried about too many things. My mind won't let me rest." "One must only be worried about one thing to be worried about too many things," GuideMa told her as she finally looked away from her book and peered at the Woman. "I know," Pluck said as she rolled on her other side, facing away from the Femor. "It is just so hard not to worry when weariness won't let me sleep." GuideMa took her book and flipped back to the start of it, and then she read aloud, "Once upon a time, there lived a young Femor who—" "Are you reading to me?" Pluck questioned her after she rolled over and faced the Femor. "I am reading to myself out loud. I believe if I do so I will be able to hear the words over your staring." "How can staring be loud?" "It just can," the Femor replied. "Now hush yourself or no amount of reading aloud will allow me to enjoy my book and if you happen to hear me, it is your own fault. Your duke interrupted my reading time, and I will read aloud to make sure I make it through the story," GuideMa spoke as she realized she made too much of a deal of it and repeated herself a little. She continued reading the story aloud, "Once upon a time, there lived a young Femor who was all alone. Her family had died from a sickness that had ravaged the area, and she had to fend for herself. It was not easy. Many wild beasts lived in the area so she never went outside at night but made sure to gather enough wood for the time of darkness to keep the fire going. One day..." GuideMa continued to read for some time as she stood and walked back and forth at the end of the Woman's bed. At one point, she peered at the Woman, and Pluck was sound asleep. "Sleep... one who will save Wellspring," GuideMa softly spoke, and then the Femor sighed as she muttered to herself, "I still must tell you what I saw when you were upon the Throne of Kroth. I tried before when we were in the throne of this citadel." GuideMa made a face as she dreaded the task ahead of her as she whispered, "I have to tell you what the sight of you up on that rock made me realize. So rest... one who must be protected. I will make sure to watch over you so sleep and let worry be no more." GuideMa continued to read as she returned to her own

bed. She read out loud a little longer, and then she blew out the candle and went to sleep herself.

\* \* \*

Later that night and a great distance away...

Malus returned to the Shadow Camp and immediately left his winged beast in a makeshift stable and went directly to Abhora's tent. It was very noisy within. Malus entered and found two of the men of Morgog, Avarice and Lord Caliber, and a few of the Shadow there with the Shadow Femor enjoying the sweet delights of a female Necrom. Her carcass was already half eaten. "Where is the False One?" Abhora questioned him as she saw he seemingly returned empty-handed. She also noticed the wounds on his forearms and face. "You were supposed to return with her." "I allowed her to stay," Malus answered as he peered at the death-frozen expression on the female Necrom's face and for a moment, he saw Pluck's eyes that were crying instead of the dead female Necrom's glassy eyes. Abhora asked him, "Why did you do a thing like that?" "She still intrigues me," Malus answered. "I want to see what the False One will do if I allow her to stay with those she finds of importance. Will hope again rise within her?" "Why is this hope so important?" "If I allow hope to grow within the False One, what will happen to her if I completely crush that hope?" he asked, and then Malus answered his own question, "We will finally have the False One who is full of despair?" "I understand your plan now," Abhora said. "The False One believes she can still protect those she \*cares about. Show her the error of her thinking for I also have a plan of my own that can help crush this hope you want to grow within her once more. Five hundred Shadow are moving in this direction. I will convince them to band with us here, and we will strike against those who hold onto the Light. We will all move against this citadel they have all flocked to." "Four Immortals travel with them now," Malus informed the Shadow Femor. "They will not be a problem," Abhora stated, and then she motioned to the meal before them and said, "Eat... You must be famished from your long ride." He peered at the female Necrom, who only reminded him of his last moments with Pluck, and then he said, "I am not hungry." "Rest then..." Abhora spoke as she noticed some sort of weariness about him. "We will put my plan into action tomorrow." "I will rest." "Care to share my bed tonight?" Abhora questioned him. Lord Caliber seemed to growl under his breath. "Not tonight," Malus replied after noticing the reaction from the one Man. "I have much to plan for once I have crushed the False One's hope, so I must truly rest." "Go then and truly rest," Abhora commanded him. "If we can bring the False One to our side, our victory will be guaranteed." "I know," Malus said. "I own most of Pluck and soon I will have all of her, including her despair. We will finally have the victory we have been waiting for upon those who embrace the Light."

## **Chapter Eight**

### **A New Journey**

Back at the Tower Roth Citadel...

"Pluck, wake," GuideMa spoke as she stood beside the Woman's bed. "You can sleep no more." The Woman had slept through the night and the morning of the next sun's cycle, and both Tabitha and Votar had come inquiring of her. GuideMa turned them both away, telling them the Woman needed her rest. Four more nals had gone by since then, and the Femor knew she had to wake her no matter how tired the Woman was. "Wake, False One. There is much for you to do." Pluck opened her eyes and then inquired, "Have I really been asleep? I feel as though I just shut my eyes." "You have been asleep for over twelve nals now," GuideMa informed her. "Wake before Votar or Tabitha return and break down our door. I also tire of watching over you sleep." Pluck slowly sat up and her fiery mane was flattened on one side and the other side stuck up like a frightened bush. She wished to lie back down as she said, "I do not believe you." "You do not believe that I have been watching over you?" GuideMa questioned her. "No, it is your job," Pluck sleepily answered. "I do not believe I have been asleep for over twelve nals." "Here, drink this," GuideMa said as she handed her a mug of a hot dark brew. "What is it?" "It is not poison." "I didn't think it was," Pluck said, and then she asked, "What would you do if I did die? Who would you watch?" GuideMa snapped at her, "I don't go around watching people. If I was not watching you, I would be..." "You would be what?" Pluck questioned when she didn't finish. "I would be Duke Gamemnon's personal Aviatrice again. I would be piloting a DraKa." Pluck sipped on the dark brew, and it was bitter like Sable Coffee but the taste was different. The drink did wake her some, and she asked, "Do you miss it? Do you miss being a pilot?" "I do. My life was very simple back then." "I have complicated your life then?" "You complicate everyone's life you come in contact with," GuideMa informed her. Pluck set her cup on the nightstand, stood from her bed, and stretched as her tail twitched about. She grabbed the mug and took another drink and then spoke, "You said there was much for me to do." "There is," GuideMa replied. "Everyone is going on a trip by DraKa. The White Lady has discovered the location of one of the Immortal Prophecies concerning the Serviatrix." "An Immortal Prophecy? I didn't know such a thing existed." GuideMa said, "Come, the DraKas have already been loaded and we will be eating a meal on the way." "Maybe I should go and at least splash some water on my face and peer at myself in the mirror," Pluck said. "I can't look all that presentable." GuideMa hadn't taken her eyes off of Pluck's half matted and half frayed mane, and she lied, "You look fine." "Are you sure?" Pluck questioned. "Usually when I sleep I must fix my mane when I wake." "Your appearance is fine. Come, we shouldn't keep the others waiting."

Sometime later...

Gamemnon and Tabitha sat within one of the Howdahs upon one of the DraKas, and Pluck was positioned on the floor in front of her mistress. Tabitha had a brush and was brushing Pluck's mane. The DraKa Convoy traveled through a forest of tall pines, and the ground was blanketed with their green and brown needles. "Shouldn't I be the one brushing your hair?" Pluck



questioned her. Tabitha sighed as she replied, "I am able to present myself presentable. You, on the other hand, came before everyone as if you had just stepped out of your bed." "In my own defense... I was dragged from bed half asleep to come along. GuideMa never really gave me much time to make myself presentable." Pluck peered at GuideMa as the Femor amusedly watched her, and then Pluck said, "Actually, I believe she played a trick on me." She held a mirror and looked at her own reflection and grumbled at the Femor, "My appearance is nowhere near fine." GuideMa sat at the edge of the boxed seats and spoke, "I honestly thought that was the way your mane was supposed to look." Pluck whined, "But I look like a DraKa licked one side of my head and the other side looks like several Winsome Kits have been playing with my mane like it was a scratching post." "Like I said..." GuideMa began as she hid a devious smile. "I thought that was how your mane always appeared." Pluck muttered, "I believe you only wanted me to come out in front of everyone looking the way I did." "That might also be true." "Enough about the Woman's hair!" Gamemnon snapped. "It is bad enough I have to allow her to ride with me. I don't need to hear all of you go on about it! Yes, it's a mess, but we are speaking about a barbaric race that is barely able to walk upright." Pluck glared at him but said nothing. Tabitha told him, not pleased with seeing this irritated side of him, "You could have ridden with some of your guards in their DraKa." He said nothing about her comment but did glare back at the Woman. "There..." Tabitha spoke. "Your mane is as it should be." Pluck stood, bowed to her, and said, "Thank you, Tabitha. Is there anything you would like for me to do?" "Yes, eat," Tabitha replied. "GuideMa tells me you have not eaten this sun's cycle." Pluck went over and grabbed some fruit, cheese, and bread and ate and after eating several bitefuls, she asked, "Where are we going?" "We are going to Flat Rock," Tabitha replied. "It is supposed to be about four nals away." "Speaking of which," GuideMa began as she stood. "Hurry up and finish eating." "I just started eating," Pluck said, and then she asked, "Why must I hurry?" "An agreement was made before I woke you," GuideMa explained. "Your time, because of your foolishness, has become very valuable. Tabitha as your mistress was allowed the first half nal. Votar is to be given the next full nal and then your mother and your friends the second full nal, and then I will deliver you back to your mistress for the remainder of the trip." "Are we going to stop the DraKa Convey every time I need to change DraKas?" Pluck asked. "It could take up a lot of time if—" "No," GuideMa answered with some sort of grin Pluck had never seen on her face before. GuideMa added, "And now you will understand why I volunteered for this job." Pluck tilted her head and questioned, "How will I know?" GuideMa smirked the weird grin again, and Pluck didn't like how she was smiling at her. The Femor lifted her voice and shouted, "Here she comes." GuideMa rushed over to her and before Pluck could react, GuideMa lifted her and tossed her to the DraKa next to the one they were riding in. Pluck hurtled through the air, screaming as she thought she would land on the ground or into the side of the DraKa, but she landed on a pile of pillows within Votar's DraKa. He was immediately in front of her and offering his hand so Pluck could stand. Votar's sister remained seated. "I thought she would miss," Kabal spoke. "I actually made a bet that she would miss." Pluck stood a little shaken and greatly shocked that the Femor would toss her like some sack. She saw that Nirva was also there. GuideMa soon followed her and leapt to the Howdah and sat in one of the corners of the boxed seats. "You owe me a gold coin," GuideMa told the Duchess. "I know," Kabal told her. "And you will be paid once we return to Shangra." Votar led Pluck to a seat next to his. Pluck was still shocked over what the Femor had done to her and questioned, "Why are you in charge of my time and my... transportation?" "Don't

you know?" GuideMa questioned her, and then she answered, "As your constant shadow, I was the perfect pick. Anyway, why would I want to spend any more time with you than I already have to?" "Pluck," Votar spoke so she would pay attention to him. It was the point of her visit, and Votar wanted to spend as much time with her, so he said, "I have a plan." Her mind was still whirling as much as her body had been, and she asked, "A plan for what?" Pluck looked down at herself. She was surprised she wasn't hurt as she was tossed about. "A plan to free you from your promise to the Shadow," he replied. "What sort of plan?" Pluck questioned. "You two can talk about that later," Kabal told her brother. "You two should spend some time talking about things that are not stressful. Here... I return your Winsome Kit back to you. He has become a handful for me." The male Calico Winsome Kit flew over to Pluck, and she gratefully took him in both hands. She rubbed him up against her cheek as he started to purr. "I am jealous now," Votar said, and then he asked flirtatiously, "Can I purr against your cheek?" Pluck felt her face flush, turned from his citron-gaze, and said nothing to his request, but she did hold out her hand to Votar, and he took it in his. He kissed her hand and then led them to a few seats. They sat for some time talking about pleasant things. Votar updated Pluck with what was going on back in the Great City Shangra as he had received several reports by messenger hawk, and she told him what she had learned of her father and that Prince Edward or Emperor Edward was her brother. Their time together drew short, so Pluck reached over and grabbed his hand again and said, "You know I love you." "I do," he replied. "As I love you." "No matter what happens between us or what things might separate us know my love for you will not change." "Do you speak of things other than the Shadow taking you from me?" Votar inquired. "I do." "Tell me what this other thing is that bothers you so," Votar requested. Pluck glanced at both Kabal and GuideMa, and then Pluck said, "You should know that when we do kiss... I will most likely revert to my form as a Woman. I don't know if I will stay in that form but I might. Will you be able to still love me while I wear the skin of a Woman?" "Skin..? You sound as if you will be wearing something alien to you." "I believe it will be," she admitted. "The body I have now is me, and I know this body. I don't know how different my other body is but I do know it will be different." He peered deep into her emerald-green eyes and said, "As you are you in both forms, I will still love you." "I know," Pluck said. "But if I become a woman permanently... the Necroms will never accept me as Duchess of Shangra even if there was a way to break my bound to the Shadow." "My love is so great that I would renounce my position to my sister and still marry you. We could go elsewhere on Wellspring... a place where Man is not despised." Pluck smiled as she envisioned this life he promised her even though she knew it could not come true. Hope was still something her heart could embrace while her mind focused on the future. "It is time to move on," GuideMa stated as she stood, pleased to see that the Woman was able to enjoy herself again. "Say your final goodbyes." Votar thought about telling Pluck to kiss him but what if she did change? How would the Shadow react to her as a Woman? They might kill Pluck and there was also the prophecy of the Serviatrix. A Necrom not born a Necrom... If Pluck became a Woman, she couldn't be the Serviatrix. He took both of her hands in his after they both stood, and Votar told her, "I have a plan to save you that does not violate my promise to you. I will save you from the Shadow." She didn't know what to say to his statement, so Pluck just hugged him. She grabbed ahold of him and embraced his love for her. They hugged for some time, and then they separated. "I'm ready," Pluck told the Femor, and then she said, "You are smiling as you smiled before. You really do enjoy tossing me." "I do. It is like I am taking all my aggravation that has been caused by you and I am able to take it out on

you and you can't do anything about it." Pluck suggested, "Maybe we can find another way—" GuideMa grabbed her again and before she knew what was happening, Pluck was once more flying through the air. "I forgot to warn them this time," GuideMa spoke. "Forget or purposely," Kabal questioned her. "I would never purposely forget anything," GuideMa replied with a grin. The Femor's toss had been short of the next Howdah, and Pluck plummeted for the ground, but then a mini cyclone scooped her up and placed her on the next DraKa. Pluck straightened and by the time she stood, GuideMa had joined her on the DraKa. "You missed," Pluck yelled at her as her heart still pounded from the fright of being tossed and the terror that seized her as she raced for the ground. "Maybe." "There is no maybe... you missed," Pluck accused her. GuideMa said, "You assumed I was aiming for this DraKa." "You could have hurt me and the Calico Win..." Pluck quickly searched herself for the tiny cat and when she didn't find him, Pluck rushed for the side as she yelled, "The kitten!" "He is fine," GuideMa told her as she held out the Calico Winsome Kit she had taken from the Woman before she tossed her. "Thank you," Pluck spoke as she took him from the Femor. She hugged him to herself, and then Pluck said, "I do believe you didn't miss. Why were you trying to hurt me?" GuideMa replied, "Maybe I was only obeying my duke who wanted to test how connected you are to the Immortal Woman. Fairah sensed you were in danger and saved you." "Actually, I only heard my daughter cry out in fright," Fairah spoke up very upset with the Femor. "And Zenba, who had been fluttering above our DraKa, saw that Pluck would not make our DraKa as you tossed her." "You do mean to kill me," Pluck accused the Femor. "You are only doing it very slowly and with great torment." "I've been caught," GuideMa stated with a smile. Pluck saw the mischief in the Femor's gaze and couldn't help but smile back. She turned, went, and hugged her mother with an embrace that could be their last. Pluck hated living in these moments, knowing she could be whisked away by Malus at any time. She would remember every instance as she spent some time with everyone.

Back at Tabitha and Gamemnon's DraKa...

Tabitha pointed to the DraKa next to them as she stood at the edge of the Howdah, gripping the railing in dread, and she uttered, "Your Aviatrix means to kill my Alba." "Did the Woman die?" Gamemnon questioned very hopeful as he sat in a seat. "No, I believe the Immortal Woman saved her." "A shame," he replied. "I did suggest to GuideMa that she might miss on one of her tosses." "Stop trying to eliminate my servir," Tabitha spoke angrily at him as she turned to him. "Alba belongs to me." "You treat her more like a longlost cousin than a slave," he stated. "How I treat my servir is my business," Tabitha told him. "Try to hurt her again, and I will speak to both of my fathers." Gamemnon understood her threat, so he changed the subject and questioned, "Have you prepared yourself to take the mantle of the Serviatrix?" "I am ready and yet I am not ready," she replied. "I can't help but keep thinking about what I said before. I wish there was a way to be sure I was the Serviatrix. I want to take some sort of test that I can complete that would show to all that I am the true Serviatrix. After the incident in the Valley of Blood, I want to prove to myself that I'm no coward." "You are far from a coward," he told her. "And as the true Serviatrix, there will be many battles to wage. You have the warrior's heart, both the warrior's heart of a Necrom and the warrior's heart of a Roth. The blending of these two kingdoms within you has made you very strong." "Since you have mentioned both my fathers' kingdoms, tell me more what you and my father, King Malodor, have planned once I have become the Serviatrix," Tabitha demanded. "We want you to unite the kingdoms as they once were," Gamemnon began.

“Together our two kingdoms can defeat the Shadow and the Cursed.” “And after the Shadow and the Cursed are defeated,” Tabitha began. “What do my father and yourself have planned for me?” “Why would you ask such a question?” “I get this sense that there is much more behind your schemes,” she replied. “There may be... but to talk of them now would be getting way ahead of ourselves. We should focus on the duties of the Serviatrix,” he answered. “There is much care and worry along that path that we do not need to add any more.” “I believe you are purposely avoiding talking about it.” He admitted, “I’ve been caught. Speak to your father if you wish to know more.” “I will,” Tabitha vowed. “I will.”

Back in the Immortal Woman’s DraKa...

Fairah hugged her daughter when she arrived in her DraKa, and the White Lady sensed within Pluck her sorrow and turmoil. She took her daughter by her hand and said, “Come and sit with me. You look exhausted.” She went as her mother led them to some pillows, and they sat. Zenba came and landed on Pluck’s shoulder as Zung fluttered above them so that he could see everyone. The male Calico Winsome Kit went and sat next to the female KellyZing who petted him. JuJu and SoarOn were also there. Staunch walked close to the DraKa so he and Quip could listen in on the conversation. GuideMa moved away from the others as if to separate herself from this group. She was only an outsider looking in. “I haven’t heard,” Pluck began, not wanting to focus on her own predicament. “What have the Shadow and Cursed been up to since they turned away and didn’t attack the Valley of Blood?” SoarOn spoke up first, “The Cursed have been silent. The Shadow have attack small towns and villages outside of Shangra. Nothing large yet. They have also hit other towns and villages in other lands outside of the Necrom Kingdom.” “Why only small towns?” Zenba inquired. JuJu answered, “They are spreading terror. It is a very effective weapon.” “What is the Cursed and Shadow’s overall plan?” Pluck questioned. “They want to bring about a rule of darkness,” JuJu replied. Pluck thought about his answer, and then she commented, “They want to bring to all Wellspring the type of life I saw within the Shadow Camp.” SoarOn stated, “What ye saw within the Shadow Camp is a mere glimpse into the horrors they shall bring to Wellspring.” The Immortal Egle stood as if someone or something spoke to him, and then he said, “There is an old structure close by that I would like to investigate. It might be the one we are seeking that is called Flat Rock. I have never been to it and it may hold answers for the Serviatrix or for us concerning the missing Immortals. I do not believe we need to detour the convoy to investigate. Two of us can do so.” SoarOn glanced at the Immortal Necrom before he questioned, “Fairah, would ye like to go with me... just the two of us and see what this structure might hold?” “I can go with ye,” JuJu spoke up before she could. “It has been a while since the two of us have talked,” SoarOn said. “Come, JuJu, we shall travel together once again.” “When do ye want to—” JuJu started to ask, and then he let out a shout as SoarOn picked him up and flew them on their way. Those in the Howdah could hear JuJu complaining and yelling at the Immortal Egle as they slowly vanished into the distance. Pluck asked about everyone and if they had heard news from their homelands. She greatly liked the distraction of hearing their answers and their stories from home. Pluck enjoyed her time with her friends and her mother as she sat amongst them and then something caused her to stand. “Do you hear that?” she questioned as her keen sense of hearing picked up a sound, a very beautiful sound. Pluck had the Necrom’s senses and she heard sounds before her mother and the KellyZings could. GuideMa detected what she heard, and she stated, “I hear something also. I have never heard this sound

before. It's so... so..." "Beautifully wonderful," Pluck answered for her as she felt the same as she listened to what she thought was a song. "Is some sort of creature making this sound?" "I hear them now," Fairah spoke as she stood. "And no, they are no creatures but a race, a race I believe ye have not come across as of yet." "The singing seems to be all around us," Pluck said. "I can't tell where it is coming from." "I shall show ye," Fairah spoke as she lifted into the air high enough to look over the treetops. She lowered herself back to the Howdah and commanded the Aviatrix piloting their DraKa, "Change course and head to our left for about a zoc. I want to go over to a lake that is there." The Aviatrix nodded, played a different tune on her flute, and turned her DraKa, and the large salamander-like creature with six legs and orange and yellow skin broke from formation of the convoy. They were nearly in the back of the convoy so only Votar noticed that their DraKa broke away, and he had his DraKa follow them. They traveled for about ten mites and came to a vast crystal-blue lake where the sounds were originating. "Are you telling me whoever is singing is underwater?" Pluck questioned. "I am," Fairah replied. "The Hamarr can live both on land and in the water including salt water. They always live in communities and this community happens to be located at the bottom of this lake. Look... can you see them?" Pluck leapt to the cloth that shaded the Howdah and peered down into the lake. "I do see some people gathered among what looks like structures, and they do appear to be singing." "The Hamarr sing very loud," Fairah started to explain. "They usually only sing underwater so not to hurt any of the other races. I have heard that they can use their voices as weapons." "I never knew sound could leave the water. They must be singing very very loud." Pluck stood there and listened to their voices that were so so sweet. "What do they look like? I can't quite make them out in the water." "I could explain, but we shall be meeting a group of them soon," Fairah replied. "We are heading for the Hamarr's BloodGlacier Alcazar and this very grand fortress rivals the Great City of Shangra." "I can't wait to see this BloodGlacier Alcazar and the Hamarr, but I do want to stay here for a few mites more. I can't believe how beautiful this song is." Votar's DraKa came up beside theirs, and he said, "We should be going. There is so much for us to do that we shouldn't—" "We should make time for wonder," Pluck told him as she turned and looked down at him from her perch. "If at all possible, we should always make time for wonder for we don't know when that moment might be our last chance to experience the wondrously created world around us." "We can stay a few mites more but then we must go," Votar told her. She asked him, "Have you heard their song before?" "I few times when I was younger," Votar answered as he glanced at his sister. "Kabal, myself, and one other came to the BloodGlacier Alcazar that is built around this giant hot spring." Kabal remembered the time he mentioned and she also remembered their friend who came along. It was a bitter-sweet memory. Pluck asked, "Why is it called BloodGlacier?" "A giant glacier of red surrounds the fortress and a giant spring in its center heats the structure. The Alcazar is built out of a material called Crystox and it looks like crystal clear silver," Votar explained. "The Hamarr have a grand theater down within the hot springs and a choir sings down there one nal in the morning, one nal at high sun, and three nals after the sun has set." They stayed for a few mites more, and then the two DraKas ran until they caught up with the convoy. Pluck could hear them singing as they left the area. Sometime later, the Immortal Toadian hopped over to their Howdah. "Where is JuJu?" Tad inquired. Fairah informed him, "Some time ago, he and SoarOn flew off to an old structure that is nearby." "I have never heard of an old structure in this area," Tad stated. "Nor have I," Fairah said. "I almost went with SoarOn to look into it, but JuJu wanted to go." "In which direction did they go?" Tad



inquired. Fairah pointed. "I think I shall join them," Tad said and hopped after them. Pluck spent some more time with her mother and friends, and then GuideMa stood and said, "Time to go to our next destination." Pluck also stood as if she would run away from the Femor, and then she asked, "Is there any way we could just stop the convoy and I walk over—" "No," GuideMa answered as she grabbed the Woman and hurled her to the next DraKa. "I am enjoying myself too much." Pluck landed in the next Howdah on something that cushioned her fall, and she yelled, "You missed. I landed right on top of these soft pillows and not the hard floor, so I believe the joke is on you this time," Pluck stated as she peered up to see that she wasn't in Tabitha's DraKa but Sabrina's. Pluck whispered, "GuideMa, are you trying to kill me?" All of Sabrina's companions, except for the Dreadgon who walked beside the DraKa, had drawn their weapons and were aiming them at her. Sabrina hadn't drawn her swords but had her arms crossed and was glaring down at her. "Sorry, I guess I'm at the wrong place," Pluck began as she slowly stood and raised her hands. "GuideMa was supposed to—" "I care not," Sabrina told her. "I don't care about anything that happens to you." "Should we kill the False One?" one of her companions questioned. "GuideMa!" Pluck called over her shoulder as she took a step back, nearing the edge of the Howdah. "I think you should," Sabrina answered her companion. "She did leap over here and start to attack us." "Hurled," Pluck corrected her. "I was hurled over here. If you are going to make up a story, at least use some truth to it." "What did you say?" Sabrina questioned her. Pluck stated, trying to buy herself some time, "I have heard that a lie is more believable if you put some truth in it." GuideMa jumped over to the Howdah and turned immediately to the Woman and said, "You should have seen you fly this time. You looked like some flightless swamp chicken flapping her wings, knowing she couldn't fly but trying anyway." GuideMa paused, and then she asked, "Why are you ignoring me and why do you have your arms in the air? Are you still trying to fly?" "I'm glad I could amuse you, but no, I'm not trying to fly," Pluck answered her. "My arms are up because they're not as amused as you," Pluck spoke as she motioned to Sabrina and her companions with her head. GuideMa had been so focused on seeing the Woman's expression that she hadn't noticed where they were. She said, "I missed." "I told you that before," Pluck harshly spoke to her in a hushed tone. "Didn't you hear me?" "I heard something about pillows," GuideMa answered her. "I thought you landed on a pile of pillows and told me I had missed because of your soft landing." "You're right. I'm sorry... I was referring to the pillows when I first yelled that you had missed, but now I am referring to—" "Do you mind?" Sabrina snapped. "I was in the middle of threatening the False One's life." GuideMa leaned to Pluck and said, "She's a little irked." "I don't think she's a little irked. I think Sabrina is a great deal irked. Look at the way her eyes have bugged out at us as she glares at us. I also believe that the vein over her temple is about to pop. I think we should leave." She took another step back toward the edge of the Howdah as the Femor stepped in sync with her, and Pluck said, "Hurry... Hurl me to another DraKa." "Why would I do that?" GuideMa questioned the Woman. "I will merely escape her wrath and leave you behind. I also have to say I have taken insult to the use of bugged out. I believe the term is biased to insect-like races like myself." "I am sorry that I have offended you," Pluck told her. "Are you sure you can't hurl me to some other DraKa?" "I am sure," GuideMa replied. "Perhaps, I purposely threw you here, so why would I hurl you anyplace else?" Pluck glanced at her as they reached the back of the Howdah and could back up no farther and said, "I wouldn't put it past you to purposely hurl me here... but I think this time it was an accident. Will you escape without me or fling me into the wind?" "There are pros for leaving you here. A

lot of pros..." GuideMa began. "But if I left, I wouldn't see what happens to you. I think I'll stay and see how this plays out." Sabrina yelled as she drew her twin short swords, "This is going to play out by me cutting off both of your heads!" Pluck spoke, "I think we really should leave." "You're right," GuideMa said. "It does look like she's going to cut our heads off. I really should leave." The Femor hopped away, leaving the Woman to fend for herself. Sabrina charged the False One and placed both of her blades against her neck. "GuideMa..?" Pluck uttered but could only manage to whisper-shout. "GuideMa..." "Your friend has abandoned you," Sabrina told her as if she had to. "Don't let GuideMa hear you say that," Pluck warned her. "You think you are mad... Let her wrath be upon you." "Why shouldn't I say that she abandoned you?" Sabrina questioned her. "She does not appear to be that loyal of a friend." "I was actually referring to you calling her my friend," Pluck corrected her. "I believe I understand now," Sabrina stated. "What I thought I witnessed before between the two of you as camaraderie was actually the tongues of two snakes whipping about before they struck one another." "I have no ill-will toward GuideMa, but I do believe you understand how she feels about me," Pluck answered. Sabrina glanced at the False One's arms that were still held up in surrender, and she asked, "Why haven't you drawn your mighty sword?" "What if I accidentally kill the Serviatrix?" Pluck questioned her. She was caught off by the False One's reply and inquired, "Do you believe that I am the true Serviatrix?" "If I am the False One, then it is between you and Tabitha," Pluck answered. "You both have to stay alive." Sabrina glared at her a few moments more, and then she laughed and pulled back her weapons from her neck and stepped away from the False One. She said, "You are peculiar. You could have just lied to me and said you thought I was the true Serviatrix." "Why would I do that?" "Why tell me in the first place that you think I might be her?" Sabrina asked as she relaxed but her companions didn't. Pluck didn't answer her but asked a question of her own, "Is there a reason you can't be the Serviatrix?" Sabrina didn't answer her, so Pluck took the opportunity to move things along and said, "I am sorry that I intruded on you. I was supposed to be thrown to Tabitha's DraKa." One of Sabrina's companion spoke, "Unusual way to travel." "More like someone's idea of amusement," Pluck stated. "Did Tad tell you that he went after SoarOn and JuJu as they went to explore a nearby structure?" "The Immortal Toadian does not tell me much of anything that he does as I don't tell him much of what I do," Sabrina answered. "Tell me, False One, how did you get the scars..." She stopped herself and re-stated, "How did you come about receiving your Scarred Rose?" Pluck noticed she kept the knowledge of her lashes from the others or just wanted her to believe that her companions didn't know of her Scarred Rose. Pluck said, "I will tell you the origin of mine if you will answer two of my questions." "Why two?" Sabrina inquired. "The story of my Scarred Rose comes in two parts." "Tell me your two questions," Sabrina demanded. "What is your father a king of?" Pluck asked, and then she spoke, "I would like to hold my final question until after I have heard the answer to my first." "My father is the King of Yeggs," Sabrina answered her. "Would you like for me to tell you what a yegg is as your final question?" "No, my final question is... is your father still alive?" Sabrina's companions all looked very upset at the False One's question, and Pluck thought that the third Serviatrix wouldn't answer her. She was about to withdraw her question when Sabrina spoke up. "He is and he is not. Now tell me the two-part answer as to how you received your Scarred Rose." "I was hated and feared by those I came with to Wellspring... but I received my lashes because of a power play. Two Kingdoms of Man shipwrecked on Wellspring and only one could command all." "What of the rose tattoo?" Sabrina questioned her. "The Rose is the

start of my curse, the start of my journey, and what has given me my family. She saved me from death and gave me a life I would never have expected." The male Femor companion stated, "You have given Sabrina no real answer." "No, she has," Sabrina spoke up. "I am satisfied. Now... as for your dilemma of being here..." This time the grin that had been on GuideMa's face many times made its way to Sabrina's as she questioned, "What was it you said before? I remember. As for being hurled, I can arrange that," Sabrina spoke and then nodded to her Femor companion. The male Femor companion grabbed Pluck and tossed her to Tabitha's DraKa and this time, Pluck screamed. She landed on her butt on the floor of the Howdah, and she heard GuideMa's immediate laughter. Tabitha rushed to her side and asked, "Alba, are you all right?" Pluck stood and said, "I feel very dizzy like a kite that has been flipped about by the wind." GuideMa was still laughing at her, so Pluck griped at her, "You left me behind." "I said I would." "You did," Pluck spoke, and then she said, "I don't know if I have ever heard you laugh so hard." "I was usually so busy throwing you that I never really saw your shocked and horrified expression. All I was able to see was you mimicking a swamp chicken," GuideMa told her. "Since I didn't throw you, I was able to see your face, and you looked so terrified." "I was terrified. Someone other than you was throwing me," Pluck told her. GuideMa stopped laughing. The Woman just inferred that she trusted her in some way. "Alba, sit and rest," Tabitha commanded her. "We have another two nals before we reach our destination." "Thank you," Pluck said, grateful to have lasted through all her airborne trips.

Elsewhere...

SoarOn and JuJu entered the old structure the Immortal Egle had been looking for. "I do not think that this is Flat Rock," SoarOn commented. "We have arrived at some other place." "This place looks like some sort of collapsing fortress," JuJu commented, and then he asked, "Are ye sure we should go in? It could collapse upon our heads." "The structure has stood this long," SoarOn replied as he lifted his hand and a ball of light appeared high above his head to give them light in the dark structure. "I wish to explore. Let us walk this way." JuJu followed the Immortal Egle for some time. "I do not think we shall find anything here," JuJu spoke. "All that is here are dead vines and crumbling walls." The vines, unseen by the Immortal Necrom, started to slither toward him while SoarOn busied himself with inspecting a statue with writing at its base. The vines inched their way toward JuJu and right before they snatched him, a new light came into the room and caused them to flee back into the darkness. "Here ye two are," Tad spoke as he walked into the room. "I had a time finding ye two." "I did not know that ye came along," SoarOn spoke as if a little irritated. "Ye would have if ye had invited me," Tad replied. "Have ye found anything in this collapsing fortress?" JuJu answered, "No." "I have no sense that anything is here," Tad said. "We have been gone long enough from the others. We should return." "I would like to look just a little longer," SoarOn said. "The words on this statue are too degraded for me to read, but I have this sense that they are of great importance. Both of ye come and see for ye's selves."

Back at the DraKa Convoy...

Pluck was in the grips of a nightmare as she slept on some pillows in front of her mistress. Tabitha had wanted to spend all of the time traveling with Alba talking with her, but she looked so tired that she ordered Pluck to sleep for the final nal of their journey. Within the fiendish dream, Pluck was back in the Dead Forest and the Dragon Tree stretched out its roots searching

for her. The Dragon Tree had a trunk that was gnarled and knotted with an infection. Its blackened bark only made its ominous dragon-like shape all the more terrifying. The Dragon Tree moved about its forest as Pluck tried to hide from it, but then it looked at her and spotted her. She woke with a start, quickly rose, and went to the edge of the Howdah. "What is it?" Tabitha questioned. "Something is coming," Pluck replied. "What is the Woman going on about?" Gamemnon inquired. GuideMa walked up beside Pluck and asked, "What is it?" "The Dragon Tree... I believe the Shadow are marching on this convoy," Pluck answered her. "Quickly, alert Votar and have all the Aviatrices line up the DraKas in a circle with their heads aiming in." "Why in?" GuideMa questioned. "The DraKas might be less afraid of what they can't see and their heads will be more protected," Pluck answered. "I hear their weak spot is on the head. Oh... and please take the Winsome Kit. I put him in your charge." GuideMa took the male Calico Winsome Kit and then quickly leapt to the closest DraKa, and then she leapt to Votar's DraKa to relay the message. "Did you see that?" Gamemnon questioned Tabitha. "My Femor obeyed the Woman without asking me first." Tabitha stated, "GuideMa is only playing the part you gave her. You wanted her to get close to Alba." "I wanted her to keep tabs on the Woman. There is a difference," Gamemnon stated. "You also have become close to the Woman." "She is my servir," Tabitha said. "Alba is supposed to be close to me." Gamemnon muttered to himself, "And I had said it was the other way around." The DraKa Convoy formed a circle as Pluck had requested. "I also sense them," Fairah spoke as she floated over to Pluck. "You seem to have a plan." "I do," Pluck told her mother. She turned her attention to the Duke of Torlawn and said, "All of you will fight from the DraKas. Fairah, I want you to stay in the midst of everyone. I am going to move forward and engage the first wave with the Lux." Pluck jumped down from the DraKa and rushed forward to face those who were approaching. Fairah lifted from Duke of Torlawn's DraKa and hovered some distance in the air above the center of the convoy. "Did the Woman say first wave?" Gamemnon questioned Tabitha. "Can she sense how many Shadow there are and what their plans are? Has this False One been too long with our enemies? Has the False One led us into a trap?" "Alba was not part of our group's decision to travel and where we would travel," Tabitha replied. "You or I would be more of a candidate for sabotage than Alba." "The False One did not need to know of our plans," Gamemnon spoke. "She had only to relay our plans to the enemy." Tabitha didn't argue the point anymore. She was too worried about Alba going out alone to face the approaching Shadow. Pluck drew the Lux, and lightning ionized his blade in a display of might. Pluck could sense that many Shadow were marching on them and then the feeling changed. Anger and hatred rushed forward as the Shadow no longer marched but charged as they rushed forward through the pine forest. There was a large clearing in front of her, and Pluck prepared to use the Lux as she had on the beach at MayPah when she fought Avarice, Lord Caliber, and the Commery Kingdom. The Lux understood her wishes and charged his blade even more to unleash the power needed. Sabrina moved to the edge of her Howdah and observed Pluck as she questioned her male Femor companion who was called Ferlis, "What is the False One doing?" All of her companions were ready for battle, but she had yet to draw her swords. Ferlis replied, "I believe she is going to engage the Shadow or maybe she is finally showing her true-fur and is rejoining the Shadow." "I see the False One as many things, but I do not see her as a traitor." Sabrina glanced around the DraKa Convoy, and then she whispered, "Spread the word... If it looks like we will be overrun, we will flee and let the others fend for themselves." "I will tell the others," Ferlis said. Tabitha noticed that Sabrina was also watching

Pluck and glared at the one who might take her title away from her. Sabrina equally glared back. "I really dislike Sabrina," Tabitha told Gamemnon. "As you should," he said. "She is the only one standing in your way of claiming the title of Serviatrix." She glared at Sabrina a few moments more, and then she turned her attention to Pluck and said, "I really should be by her side." "The Woman told you to stay with us," Gamemnon said. "Let her face the Shadow alone. If she should die—" "Silence!" Tabitha snapped at him. "One, Alba will not die, and two, how can I prove myself to be no coward if I stay in the safety of this Howdah." "My dear Tabitha, this Howdah will not be safe once the Shadow breach the line the Woman has set up in front of her. We shall all soon be in for a fight for our lives." Everyone fell to silence as the Shadow screeched their screams that were full of madness.

Back with Pluck near the clearing...

The first of the Shadow cleared the pine forest, and Pluck held her attack a few moments more to allow more of their enemy to come into the path of the blade. The Shadow were nearly upon her, and Pluck let loose the power of the Lux and struck down two hundred Shadow, and they all died instantly. The Shadow kept coming, mowing over their fellow Shadow as if they meant nothing to them and there were more of them this time. Pluck once again prepared to attack with the Lux. Nearly four hundred Shadow had charged out of the pine forest. Pluck began to swipe the Lux when the choker seized her neck and seized her quickly. Her life trickled from her body, and she collapsed to one knee. The Shadow continued to screech as they neared. Pluck looked up as she heard wings beating. Malus upon his winged beast descended off to the side of her and away from the clearing. Abhora rode behind Malus. "The weapon she wields is as powerful as you said," Malus told the Shadow Femor. "I experienced only a nip and it was a frightening nip." Abhora spoke, "I still do not believe we have seen its full potential." "Should I allow her to attack again?" "No," Abhora replied. "Let the False One understand what it means to go against us. She must understand her role. She can't save those she finds of importance." Pluck's heart panicked as the Gold Choker of Fettering forced her out of the fight on a spiraling wave towards unconsciousness. She was supposed to save all of those behind her. Pluck gritted her teeth, enduring the pain and rose back to both feet and prepared to deal one final blow to the Shadow. She might not get another chance, so she needed to use the full might of the Lux and destroy all of the Shadow before her even Malus. Pluck couldn't think about what would happen if his life ended... how connected a bond she shared with the Shadow Necrom. She lifted the Lux, and he gathered a great deal of energy onto himself. "The False One is back on her feet," Abhora warned the Shadow Necrom. "Subdue her or I will kill her. A great victory will belong to us if we can kill the two Serviatrixes and two Necrom dukes. Their deaths will leave the succession of the Necrom throne in an upheaval." Malus lifted the Constraining Dagger, and Pluck felt the choker squeeze her neck even harder. She couldn't breathe and her life was still draining from her. Pluck only had one chance to save everyone. She lifted the Lux as stars spotted her vision. She wanted to scream but she had no air left. Pluck drew back the sword to swipe it when an explosion of life-energy left her body, and she fell as a corpse to the ground. The Shadow ran past her lifeless form and headed for the DraKa Convoy. "It would seem that you have taken the False One's life," Abhora spoke. "Her life is mine to take," Malus informed the Shadow Femor. "Now I will take the lives of all those who are of importance to her."